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**FAY WELDON'S LATE BLOOMERS AND COMEDY
AND
A LAWYER, A VET, AND A COUPLE OF DOGS,
ONE OF THEM DEAD**

by

Susan Rote Siferd

**A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English**

**Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
June 2001**

FAY WELDON'S LATE BLOOMERS AND COMEDY
and
A LAWYER, A VET, AND A COUPLE OF DOGS,
ONE OF THEM DEAD

Susan Rote Siferd, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2001

Creative dissertation begins with a critical study of comedy as Weldon employs it in her novels of marriage, infidelity, and divorce. Traditionally, comedy ends in marriage; Weldon's dark comedies end in self-understanding as a necessary prerequisite to growth and possible future relationship. However, Weldon does not celebrate divorce. She recognizes the impact on women's lives of historic period, world events, and their own female nature. An avowed feminist, Weldon yet refuses to blame men for women's problems, but insists that while women struggle against sexism, they often conform to it. If there is no genre designation comparable to "bildungsroman" for a novel whose plot concerns the coming of age of a middle-aged wife, then Weldon has invented it, and I identify the structural elements of such a plot. Weldon takes women's comedic tradition to another level, wielding the tools of satire, wit, and irony.

My concerns are similar to Weldon's, and so is my narrative tone. My novel concerns issues of personal and professional ethics, the intersection of the public and private. Sweetie, the show dog, expires on Dane Kaufman's

operating table, and her owners sue. Before the daisies wilt over her grave, the tragedy has compounded, involving several families. The final toll includes two long-standing marriages, a successful medical practice--albeit that of a veterinarian and not a heart surgeon (his wife's distinction)--and threatens a fledgling political career, and the Rev. Ronald Damschroder's controversial membership campaign at the Second First United Methodist Church. If anyone doubts that a dog's death can draw into a maelstrom so many other the lives, let them consider Desdemona's misplaced handkerchief. If a mere square of linen could reduce a great man into a bellowing, murderous beast, how much greater must be the power of a beribboned toy poodle over the lesser folk of Vieux Chien, Michigan? One hopes that the children can learn from the mistakes of their parents, but will they?

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Susan Rote Siferd

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CHAPTER I

FAY WELDON'S LATE BLOOMERS AND COMEDY

"Listen, and you hear your own heartbeat. Listen hard enough, and it'll tell you the story of your life. Whether it's comedy or tragedy depends only upon where you stop."--Fay Weldon, *Trouble*

In a scene from my novel, Dane Hoffman encounters Sharon Hedstrom at a YMCA swim meet where, in the midst of forty noisy young children turning hand-springs in nervous anticipation of their next events, she is trying to study for a college anthropology course. Dane is amused by the incongruity of the situation and also because he has always known Sharon as the wife of his attorney, the mother of his child's friend, the owner of a dog he cares for in his veterinary practice. Here she is, acting like an individual in her own right. Dane says, "Do you do this for fun, or are you serious about it?" and Sharon, startled from her concentration, holds up her highlighting marker like a switchblade and replies, "I'm dead serious, Dane." Many women who write comedy brandish their pen in a similar attitude, and the reader too quick to dismiss their serious intent and to regard their work as merely entertaining may find them self like Dane, backing away with an apology.

British novelist Fay Weldon is such a writer. Weldon explores relations between the sexes in novels that might be described as bildungsromane for the middle-aged. In an earlier draft of this paper, I applied the term "novels of wifely education and growth" to describe the kind of bildungsroman that

Weldon writes, but the term is cumbersome and inexact. When a friend¹ suggested that I read Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel* (1988), I thought I had found, not only a graceful term, but support for my argument. Gullette's book is excellent and insightful, but upon careful reading, I concluded that Weldon's novels don't fit the genre exactly as Gullette describes it. Weldon's characters are middle-aged and they make progress, but unlike the characters in Gullette's study, Weldon's women have not laid to rest the demons of their young adulthood. Rather, they are late bloomers who arrive belatedly to a recognition of those demons. Getting these characters to the point of recognition comprises the plot of each novel. They have much work to do before they can attain the perspective of the characters in the novels in Gullette's study. But if Weldon's characters lack insight concerning their problems, the narrator does not. Weldon's novels have a strong narrative voice, and that voice is the source of much of the complicated tone characteristic of her style. Unlike the young-adult bildungsroman that Gullette describes, in which the writer (and narrator) share a similar perspective of the events described in the novel, Weldon's novels feature a narrator who is wiser than the characters and comments on the action accordingly. The thrust of the plot is to bring the characters up to the same level of awareness as the narrator's. I am interested in how that narrative voice works with the hybrid bildungsroman-midlife progress plot to produce the sometimes off-the-wall comedic effects so characteristic of Weldon. This paper will examine Weldon's use of genre and comedy to create a body of work that teeters between the realistic and sheer farce.

¹ My thanks to Dr. Tyler R. Tichelaar for his suggestion.

Relationship of the Bildungsroman or Midlife Progress Novel to Comedy

Margaret Morganroth Gullette's study is a useful place to begin because, on her way to identifying the novel of midlife progress, she makes distinctions between the bildungsroman of young adulthood and the plot of systematic disillusionment identified with literary realism and a decline theory of life. She also shows how these genres relate to comedy. "Bildung," she notes, "emphasizes process and positive change (5). "All Bildungsromane by definition plump for 'better.' (They thus fall under the broadest, simplest, definition of comedy, as an action that produces improvement in the state of the main character, but individually they vary so much from gaiety to caution that the comic rubric doesn't take us far.)" (30). She terms the midlife progress novel an even happier genre in which the problems of young adulthood have disappeared and a character has gained perspective and wisdom. The plot of the midlife progress novel is the discovery that life still holds out gifts to older protagonists; the plot itself dispels the "dragon" disguise that characters of middle age have been forced to wear in Western literary tradition--and even in comic tradition.

Gullette's theory stems from a longitudinal study of four writers: Saul Bellow, John Updike, Margaret Drabble, and Anne Tyler), each of whom has written a number of novels over a period of many years. She is examining, then, what she calls "life-course fiction." Gullette compared the novels written by the four writers as young adults with those written when they had attained middle age. This method allowed her to trace the evolution of attitudes in the writers that in turn affected the characters they created. What she found is that, flying in the tradition of myth, legend, fairy tales, and the novel, where youth is always championed over age, the four contemporary

writers in her study are proving that "people can grow over the course of their lifespan in ways that make it possible for them to come to 'write' . . . a happier genre" (xii). The writers in Gullette's study began producing these happier works around 1975 when, she says "it was observable that the culture was giving its writers permission to overthrow the traditional decline view that the middle years are a time of devolution on a spectrum from fatigue through multiplied losses to despair" (xii). Gullette further notes the difficulty of chipping away at pessimism's sway in the literature of high culture:

"...comedy, pastoral, romance, and the Bildungsroman of youth . . . have the standing of licensed fools, permitted to utter 'nonsense' or qualified and partial sense. The mere existence of such forms is no counter argument to the dominance of literary pessimism, as long as literature's hierarchies undermine their value. Millennia after Aristotle, comedy is still a lower form, unless it takes the Beckettian view of 'after the fall.' Twentieth-century film, where these permitted genres can be seen to flourish, actually invented the good-guy loser . . . who through no fault of his own doesn't get the girl and isn't better off at the end. The rejoicing forms that used to mark adult achievement—epithalamia, birth poems, celebrations of military or literary or institutional triumphs—scarcely exist in the twentieth century or have been transformed by our irony." (152)

Examining the early novels of the four writers, Gullette found that the early novels portray young adulthood as a dangerous time, fraught with dread and fear of adult responsibility. Young adult characters marry for the wrong reasons, still radically unready for marriage, but responding to "some awful imperative of life" (8). The birth of a baby "results in an actual or symbolic divorce between women and men" (12). Men are shown to flee from paternal responsibility, while women are portrayed as ambivalent towards motherhood; meanwhile, the parents of the young married couple remain "sources of anger, or neglect, or adverse judgment" (14), and the novels

abound with "images of feeling pressed, crowded, and claustrophobic" (15). Their own "absence of control" is what "most terrifies the young" (18). "They can't create a self-chosen, more self-confident, happier future--they can't progress in the life course as they must and want to. . . . [T]hose who can't imagine progress for themselves can only imagine regress" (15). Gullette concludes: "Forget the so-called midlife crisis. It's the 'young adult crisis' we ought to be commiserating with" (19).

When she examined the novels the four writers produced later in life, she found very different attitudes in the characters they now created, and argues that this reflects a change in the perspective of the writers themselves. Generally the change can be called resiliency or flexibility, an ability to put things into perspective so that once-major obsessions become less threatening. Many of the problems that plagued their younger characters had simply vanished in the same way that most illnesses will clear up by themselves: the characters had outgrown them or life itself had removed the problem. Gullette applies the word "cure" rather than "education" to describe the growth and change that occurs. Violence, death, children, parents--the great challenges of young adulthood recede into a wider context. Children grow up, parents die, and death seems paradoxically less threatening to characters who are chronologically closer to it, simply because the writers and their middle-aged characters have survived it successfully for so long. Characters, "no longer young, are capable of loving and inspiring love" but "love does not have to be sexual or marital: friendship may be the kind of love the protagonist feels most, just then" (3). Gullette believes that the writers themselves had grown out of "the dangerous age." Their later novels pick up at a different time of life, the characters are middle-aged, "relatively mature and rational people--precisely the kind of midlife adults

that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction writers relegated to secondary roles, almost unable to imagine them as creators of plot and centers of subjectivity" (33). The later novels reveal that "some important original incapacities--fear, guilt, anger, sense of risk about life-course tasks, hesitation about believing in change, sense of stagnation--have been noticeably resolved" (32-3). But the "cures occur, as it were, between the novels" (32). While individual *bildung* narratives show the process of growth, life-course fiction will reveal big jumps of growth from one novel to another. Gullette notes the midlife progress novel's "assured and savvy advocacy of a neglected or maligned stage of life belongs at the beginning of any characterization of the genre. But that function scarcely suggests the cultural audacity of the genre. It dares to prize the middle years more than earlier stages of life. . . . They can even wind up saying--to the astonishment of some readers--that it is better to be older than to be younger" (4-5). The plot of the midlife progress novel is melioristic rather than optimistic, but clearly closer to comedy than the realistic novel allows. "Oh, I think that realistic literature from the first has been a victim literature. . . . Everything that people believed in the nineteenth century about determinism, about man's place in nature, about the power of productive forces in society, made it inevitable that the hero of the realistic novel should not be a hero but a sufferer who is eventually overcome" (Bellows qtd. in Gullette 152). Gullette adds: "The problem was that the decline narrative wouldn't side with the adult sufferer. It had a hard time seeing his or her suffering as meaningful because it remorselessly allied adult longing with vice, (bourgeois) greed, or inappropriateness. It is time to ask why the Victorian prestige of these associations should infect our contemporary beliefs" (152-3).

Weldon's Novels of Midlife

Fay Weldon's work lends itself well to a similar longitudinal study, since her twenty-two novels were written over a period of more than thirty years. Like Updike and Tyler, she is still writing and publishing fiction. But the characters of even her midlife novels resemble the youthful characters in the early works of Gullette's four novelists. Weldon's characters continue to be plagued by problems that began in young adulthood and even childhood. Her protagonists are ill-suited to their mates, yet strive to make their marriages work. Husbands and wives are never faithful, and friends always have an eye on one's spouse. The women may or may not be good mothers, but the husbands are abominable fathers. They have ambivalent relationships with their own parents--especially their mothers, who offer poor advice for the best of reasons: to spare their daughters from repeating their own mistakes. Of course, that's exactly what they do. The novels often end, not in reconciliation or reintegration, but in the departure of the main character from their community, whether that be the nuclear family, their village, or their entire social network of job, home, and life as they've known it. Friends, husbands, even children may be left behind as the character sets out on her own, not with a sense of high adventure or anticipation, but armed with new self-knowledge--and some options: the promise of a career and, perhaps even a new love. In this respect, her novels resemble the midlife progress novels Gullette describes. Weldon considers such an outcome preferable to sticking it out; to putting up a front, living a lie, or being allowed to cherish one's illusions.

Weldon is a versatile writer, who tries so many things, it's difficult to pin her down. As soon as the critic makes a generalization, an exception

comes to mind. For instance, Weldon identifies her work with realism. Her non-fictional *Letters to Alice Upon First Reading Jane Austen* brims with writerly advice to her niece, a fledgling novelist, including an entire chapter devoted to realism. But in fact she can't keep from taking liberties with credibility. The extensive plastic surgeries Ruth undergoes in *Life and Loves of a She-Devil* strain credibility to the breaking point and throw the novel into the realm of romance. The revelation that Lady Angelica Rice's "perforated personality" can be explained by the fact that her mother took on the entire football team, and hence her multiple personalities reflect her shared paternity, shoots *Splitting* right into the goal to score a winning farce. Weldon has a degree in psychology (and economics) and is careful to integrate all of Lady Angelica's personalities in an orderly and believable manner. But otherwise, Weldon moves in and out of realism. Besides throwing us curves in the way of bizarre plot twists, her intrusive narrator keeps bringing the reader back to the surface of the fictive dream. She knows readers are sophisticated about the conventions of fiction, able and willing to follow her as she leads them from the depths to the surface and back again; so Weldon plays with the conventions of fiction and of realism. Her novels open where "happily ever after" leaves off--and then immediately drop off, leaving her characters dangling over an abyss. As these midlife characters scramble about to save themselves, they shrug off the cumbersome apparel of lives that only seem to work. Stripped down to their skivvies, they recover their former flexibility and strength and easily reach the safety of solid ground. Midlife progress is achieved after systematic disillusionment and discoveries that other adults make earlier in life. Weldon gives her women considerably harsher treatment than, say, Ann Tyler typically gives her middle-aged wives in novels such as *Earthly Possessions*, *Breathing Lessons*, and *Ladder of*

Years. Tyler's heroines walk out on their husbands in the novel's opening chapters, but only to return home at novel's end, with an appreciation for the validity of their marriage. And there they find their husband waiting patiently. For them, marriage functions as a kind of restraint, but also a safety net that's always there. Weldon sees the gaping tear in the net and lets her characters fall through.

It's probably impossible to pin her down, to study her career for tendencies of progression. But throughout her career she has continued to write two kinds of novel: one kind is generally more serious in tone, features more characters, more story lines, and more historic context. This kind of Weldon novel is altogether more complex and includes titles such as *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967), *Down Among the Women* (1972), *Female Friends* (1974)), and *Big Girls Don't Cry* (1997). These novels are not without comedy, and they abound with wit and irony. They may be more likely to be taken by critics for "serious" novels. A second kind of Weldon novel, however, takes more risks. The comedy or satire in this kind of novel is more extravagant, the excesses more outrageous. But the tragedy, when it occurs, is proportionately bleaker. Indeed, there's a Dickensian extravagance in Weldon's portrayal of the evil upon evil one character may inflict and another endure. Among this kind of Weldon novel are *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), *Trouble* (1993), *Splitting* (1995), and *Worst Fears* (1996). Despite the variance in tone among the novels, a number of plot elements carry from the earliest to the most recent book. This demonstrates that, while many of her views about life and love have remained consistent, what has evolved is her sense of comedy, which has grown more pronounced. Perhaps this heightened sense of the comic reflects a change of perspective in Weldon such as Gullette sees in Updike, Bellows, Tyler, and Drabble.

The plot elements that recur in Weldon's work include: a crisis event that throws a marriage into turmoil; a wife's panicked efforts to restore the marriage to equilibrium (she may take action or else get very busy avoiding taking action); a journey or quest resulting systematic recognition of painful truths about the self in relation to husband, friends, children, parents; considerations of an economic nature that demonstrate a woman's ability to take care of herself; final reconciliation with the self, an end to the marriage, and launching out to begin anew. These elements are present in the earliest novels as well as the most recent. This is not to suggest that Weldon is a writer of formulaic fiction; rather, this pattern suggests her insistence that where problems exist, sooner or later they will erupt and wreak havoc on many lives; also, that mere recognition of a problem is never enough.

Weldon writes about the generation of women who grew up during the War—her own generation. Perhaps she sees these women as particularly vulnerable to the pressure of the historic period to grow up too fast, before the psyche caught up with the body. A common characteristic of the women in her novels is their stoicism. They endure by putting up with hardship and deprivation. They are resilient, they survive; but they don't escape without a scratch. And they pass along to their daughters the same attitude: stoicism. In consequence, the younger generation repeats the mistakes of the older; the sins of the mothers are visited upon the daughters. A prime example of this occurs in *Female Friends*, in the characters of Gwyneth and Chloe.

"Understand and forgive. . . . Nothing in this world is perfect; to protest takes the strength needed for survival. Grit your teeth, endure" (46). While this strategy may have helped Gwyneth surmount the difficulties of raising a child alone and unsupported during the War, it ruins her life later, and almost ruins Chloe's as well.

A Crisis Event That Throws a Marriage Into Turmoil

In a Weldon novel, the principal characters are married on page one, but a crisis occurs that throws the marriages off-balance and threatens their emotional and economic well-being. Indeed, the very identity of each woman is cast in doubt. The crisis event in *The Fat Woman's Joke* occurs when Esther and Alan agree to go on a diet together. As a result they starve their marriage almost to death. The diet becomes a metaphor for the emotional emptiness of the marriage. Esther says: "He didn't make me go on a diet. We decided to do it. He quite willfully set about depriving me. I quite willfully set about depriving him. We conspired together to break our marriage'" (112). Esther moves out. In *Female Friends*, the crisis is not Oliver's infidelity to Chloe; that has gone on for some time with her tacit agreement. In *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Bobbo is having an affair with a romance novelist named Mary Fisher, whose physical beauty far exceeds that of his wife, Ruth. Bobbo bites the line that Fisher throws him and leaves his family. In *Splitting*, Lady Angelic Rice learns that her husband, Edwin, has been having an affair with Susan, "the Great Adulteress of Barley," who has entertained the husbands of several friends in her home, aptly called, considering the traffic, Railway Cottage. He files for divorce and attempts to charge her with all manner of immoral behavior. In *Worst Fears*, Ned's fatal heart attack is the crisis event that sets off a series of discoveries that force Alexandra to recognize the sad state of her marriage. The work of marriage is the incorporation of two separate individuals into one flesh. How does one spouse separate from that joint entity without also sliding into non-existence?

But the crisis in the marriage of a Weldon heroine need not be

inherently bad. In *Trouble*, Annette is expecting a long-wished-for baby and learns that her first novel is to be published. The “trouble” is that her husband, Spicer, grows jealous of her ability to create in arenas of both male and female achievement. With the help of a quack therapist, he attempts to convince Annette that she is responsible for his unhappiness; moreover, that it’s not her achievements, but her very self that is the problem with their marriage. “The matter is that your moon in the First is quincunx your moon in the Seventh; you simply have no idea how to be a wife. Well, the unhappy daughter seldom has” (51). Clearly Spicer is more reprehensible than Annette, while she is the type of wife who readily accepts the blame when things go wrong. Maybe Annette has read too many women’s magazines that pander to a reader’s willingness to believe in quick-fix remedies for marital dysfunction.

A Wife’s Panicked Efforts to Restore Her Marriage to Equilibrium

Having set the plot in motion with a crisis event, Weldon sets her women characters on a quest to restore equilibrium to her life. Each one has just received a revelation that removes her from the plot she thought to be the story of her life, and plops her into another kind of plot altogether.

While the immediate response is to recoil from pain, each character responds in one of two ways: either she pretends not to know, and does nothing, or she takes action. Chloe (*Female Friends*) and Alexandra (*Worse Fears*) feign ignorance, while Esther (*Fat Woman*) only seems to take action. Ruth (*She-Devil*), Angelica (*Splitting*), and Daffy (*Big Girls*) take action, and the reader takes vicarious pleasure in watching these women’s bad behavior.

Weldon’s novels are filled with women who pretend not to notice the

most outrageous sexual misconduct performed under their very noses.

Chloe is one such woman. Oliver has been having an affair with the live-in maid, Françoise, for some time. Even when he tries to force the issue, Chloe refuses the bait. "If you mind about Françoise, you know you only have to say." Oliver tells her, and Chloe's quick response is, "Of course I don't mind, . . . and as far as she can tell she doesn't" (8). In the climactic moment of the novel, when Oliver forces her to watch him having sex with the maid, her attitude changes in a most unexpected way, and her response demonstrates her salvation: Chloe laughs. But as the novel opens, she is doing what so many of the women in Weldon's novels do: sleepwalking. "Down here among the women, we do a lot of sleepwalking. The only way to get through some days is to suppose one will presently wake up" (*Down Among the Women* 37). Alexandra adopts a similar pose, portraying in her very posture the dogged lack of response to crisis exhibited by certain of Weldon's women characters. When the novel opens, Alexandra seems to be in shock--after all, she's just learned that Ned is dead. "Alexandra sat in suspension. She had a vision of herself as a particle in a test-tube of viscous liquid which drifted neither up nor down, but was obliged by the laws of nature to stay exactly where it was. She found it was easier to have an idea of herself as something inorganic than organic" (2). As the novel progresses, however, we recognize that this state of suspension has characterized Alexandra's response to life all along. The more she is faced with evidence of Ned's infidelity, the more she resists facing the truth; and she is aided by friends whose apparent loyalty masks self-interest; for each of the friends has betrayed Alexandra by sleeping with Ned. Perhaps the most extreme example of Alexandra's convoluted thinking is when she finds Ned's toothbrush in Jenny Linden's bathroom. Alexandra invents a plausible

reason that exonerates Ned, but casts Jenny in a negative light as “a true fan, a devotee, a groupie, a stupid, plain, fat middle-aged woman well beyond her sell-by date. . . . Perhaps Jenny had stolen it? Perhaps she welcomed this dreadful intimacy—that she should put in her own mouth what had been in Ned’s?” (54) Alexandra’s glib loyalty to her spouse and her self-satisfaction both need to be excised from her character, and Dr. Weldon performs the surgery without anesthetic. But like any doctor, she inflicts pain in order to heal.

In *The Fat Woman’s Joke*, Esther’s response to her marital crisis is to move out. But this act is only apparently a move towards freedom. In reality, she encloses herself more thoroughly into prisons of her own making. She takes a basement flat with bars on the windows and lives—or rather exists—like an animal in a cage, eating to dull the pain. Of course, the more she eats, the more weight she gains, the more she is smothered in layers of fat meant to protect her. In reality, however, her tactics will harm her.

“During the day she would read science fiction novels. In the evenings, she watched television. And she ate, and ate, and drank, and ate. She ate frozen chips and peas and hamburgers, and sliced bread with bought jam and fishpaste, and baked beans and instant puddings, and tinned porridge and tinned suet pudding, and cakes and biscuits from packets. She drank sweet coffee, sweet tea, sweet cocoa and sweet sherry. This is the only proper holiday I’ve had for years, she thought, but this is not a holiday, this is my life until I die: and then she would eat a biscuit, or make a piece of toast, and melt some ready sliced cheese on top of it, remembering vaguely that the act of cooking had been almost as absorbing as the act of eating.” (*The Fat Woman’s Joke* 7-8).

The list of foods that she eats reads like a warning from the Heart Association: all processed foods, heavy in fat and sugar: empty calories that will fill her up but not nourish her or sustain life. The image conjured by

Esther's response is passivity carried to such an extreme as to be ultimately suicidal.

Lady Angelica (*Splitting*) begins to fall apart right along with her marriage to Edwin, separating into several personalities. Each personality represents another fragment of her self, and each one exhibits different traits, making Angelica a sort of all-in-one ensemble cast. But which is the "real" Angelica? The issue of separation and of integration figures in many of Weldon's novels. When a marriage falls apart, wives struggle to establish an identity independent of their husband. They feel robbed of their possessions, their memories, their very existence. Angelica herself expresses this sense of loss: "He had stolen her home from her, and now he robbed her even of memories of him. He had stolen twelve years. She had no choice, if she were to live at all, but to go back to being the person she was when she married him: like a child too long and too often away from school, how would she ever catch up? She would have to limp along behind everyone else for ever" (184).

Annette (*Trouble*) passively accepts Spicer's criticism and resolves to be a better wife. Determined to keep her marriage together, the action that she takes is to comply with his increasingly unreasonable demands: everything from sex in uncomfortable positions to therapy with Spicer's own Jungian/ New Age/ astrologer-therapist, Dr. Rhea Marks. Compliance is one form of action she takes; but she couples this with an effort to reason with Spicer and his therapist. Annette's compliance is portrayed in sex scenes that are both horrible and funny. In bed, Spicer comes off as selfish and sadistic, while Annette clearly feels no pleasure at all, yet her eagerness to comply is so mechanical as to be funny. The more Spicer is turned on, the less so is Annette. Somehow Weldon manages to create, in writing, a sense of

wonderful physical comedy in these scenes, and she achieves this by means of dialogue. Spicer's exchanges become increasingly poetic and metaphorical as Annette's get terse and literal. Her discomfort and lack of response threaten to bring him down.

"Don't talk all the time, darling. Stop thinking. Just *be*."

"Can I just say one more thing?"

"... I love all of you, Annette. ... You're like the sea; I love to drown in you. But, like the seas, you have your moods: sometimes you can be dangerous. So I must learn to navigate you. Is that comfortable?"

"Well, not totally any more," said Annette. "You are quite heavy on the bump."

"Turn on your side, then. Is that better?"

"Well, yes, but then I can't see you," said Annette. "I like to see you. . . ."

"But by liking to see me we have to stay very decorous, very missionary, Annette."

"Something's lost, something's gained," said Annette. "I'll turn on my side. Not too hard, not too violent, please. I wouldn't want you to shake the baby loose--"

"Babies are well locked in," said Spicer. "Nature sees to it. Other women don't make this fuss. Don't make me feel guilty or none of this will work . . . turn over, talk into the pillow if you have to-. Annette, I'm coming, I can't help it, you moved so suddenly--come with me--please--"

"I am, I am. There."

"There. Oh my God. I love you, Annette." (*Trouble* 58-59)

The disparity between their feelings and response as portrayed by Weldon's brilliant dialogue results in scenes more of marital jousting than lovemaking. These scenes reveal character and suggest that Annette's passivity and compliance may mask underlying feelings of resentment that will eventually surface. Until that happens, Annette's most characteristic verbal exchange is an apology: she apologizes at least forty-three times in the novel, and by far most often to Spicer. She even apologizes when her baby dies *in utero* and the cause of death is determined to be septicemia contracted from cheap gold bracelets Spicer gave her as a birthday "gift," a gift given to achieve some

bizarre mystical end (specifically, to bring Annette's Hera under the control of his Zeus). Annette's habit of acquiescence to someone else's authority results in tragedy; it costs her baby its life.

Annette's more active response to her marital crisis is to attempt to reason with Spicer, and when that fails, with Dr. Rhea Marks herself. Dr. Rhea has persuaded Spicer, a wine merchant, that he is an artist and that Annette is holding back his spiritual development. In the scene where Annette visits Dr. Rhea, a subtle reversal takes place by which she applies common sense to the situation and begins to psychoanalyze the therapist. Annette says: "I wonder what your motives are in doing this to me? Are you jealous because I'm pregnant? Or because I've written a book? Perhaps you're a would-be novelist? Perhaps you've tried and you can't, so you sit there earning a living by writing living fictions, altering the narrative of other people's lives . . . (101). Annette's efforts to reason with either Spicer or Dr. Rhea fail. Spicer has fallen under the sway of an unscrupulous quack who wants to get his money. In matters where the emotional stakes are high, Weldon shows that reason carries little weight. Only when Annette uses reason to reach conclusions concerning her own behavior, can she take correct action and make progress.

Ruth (*She-Devil*), too, takes incorrect action: she gets revenge. She contrives a two-fold plot: first, to destroy both Bobbo and Mary Fisher; and secondly, to transform herself into Mary Fisher. The novel has a circular construction that recalls the idea of the wheel of fortune. As the novel opens, Mary Fisher is living in a high tower on the edge of the sea. She writes romance novels, or as Ruth puts it, "She tells lies to herself, and to the world" (1). And Bobbo, Ruth's husband, is in love with her. In the end, Mary Fisher is dead; Ruth lives in the high tower on the edge of the sea. Bobbo is

enthralled with her as he once was with Mary Fisher. She has even written a romance novel and had it accepted for publication by Mary Fisher's own publisher. But here is where Ruth remains herself: she won't publish her novel. "Enough to know I can do it, if I want. It was not so difficult after all; nor she so special" (278). Ruth knows the romance novel plot is a lie and won't exploit a potential reader's vulnerability to such rubbish. In that sense she is superior to Mary Fisher. However, having come full circle and having witnessed the reversal of Mary Fisher's fortunes and Ruth's corresponding rise in fortunes, the reader anticipates another turn of the wheel that will topple Ruth as well.

Indeed, her decline is already in progress. Ruth's willingness to act creates a spine of plot points in a comic parody of the revenge tragedy plot of the English Renaissance. But by grafting this plot onto a circular frame, Weldon also creates a moral fable reminiscent of the Medieval exemplum.² Ruth is destroyed by her own obsession with Mary Fisher. At first her path seems to lead her towards independence and self-sufficiency. Although she is physically unattractive, Ruth is strong, intelligent, and original. She has opinions that make her fascinating to a number of the characters she encounters. She begins her journey penniless and homeless; but with each move through a succession of jobs and new relationships, she manages to improve herself, adopting a new persona as a cover for her true identity (Ruth accumulates identities; Lady Angelica in *Splitting* discards them). At the height of her career she is Vesta Rose, owner of an employment agency dedicated to helping disadvantaged women like herself. Of course, that work is only a front, another point in her revenge plot. Ruth is creating a fiction of

² This brilliant black comedy lost much of its power when translated into film because Roseanne Barr was miscast as the sublime Ruth and in general the actors played the comedy too broadly.

her own that proves more powerful than Mary Fisher's romance plot. By means of a succession of fantastic plastic surgeries, she further transforms her physical self into Mary Fisher: blonde, petite, a femme fatale. Like Dr. Frankenstein, Ruth ultimately creates a monster. The transformed Ruth is to be presented at a party thrown by one of her plastic surgeons, Dr. Black. The doctor's wife calls Ruth "an impossible male fantasy made flesh . . . an insult to womanhood. What's more, she looks much like anyone else, only taller. . . You and your friends aren't doctors. You are reductionists"(259). Ruth, Weldon says, was "dealing with envy by becoming the envied object. She put all her good into the other woman and took all her bad" (Pearlman 81). As the revenge plot thickens, Mary Fisher is forced to take on the responsibility for Ruth's children and her own aging mother. Her writing career falters as her experience with reality forces her to lose faith in her own romance plot. She loses Bobbo, gets cancer, and dies. But she has done penance, made amends, and is redeemed. Action may be preferable to passivity, but Weldon's heroines must act wisely.

A Journey or Quest Resulting in Recognition of Painful Truths

Regardless of the kind of action that these women take or the retreat from action they may attempt, they have been set upon a path toward enlightenment that may be compared to the journey of quest which fictional heroes must always undertake. That these female characters hardly seem to be the stuff of which heroes are made, and that at best they may be reluctant travelers is precisely the point: irony is Weldon's forte. The journey each character makes involves a systematic recognition of painful truths about her relationship with every important person in her life: husband, friends,

children, and parents. Of course, the person she must ultimately confront is herself. One aspect of her heroic quest concerns discovering the truth about her own failures in these relationships. As in "real" life, Weldon's wives merged with a partner too soon, before they had melded as a separate and fully functioning individual. Somehow they have managed to hobble about in relationship by leaning too heavily on their partners for support. The women must learn to stand on their own two feet, emotionally but also financially. Economic independence is a major component of their quest.

Facing the Truth About Their Husbands and Marriages

The husbands of these women are complex individuals, capable of love as well as cruelty. Most of these men are ripe for what is called a midlife crisis. They may have aspired to other kinds of professions than the one they ended up in: mostly they are ad men or accountants, occupations which evoke either selling out or a drone-like attention to the wrong kinds of values. Esther's husband, Alan, is an ad man who once had artistic aspirations. In the early throes of infatuation, his secretary (and mistress) tells a friend how Alan "was so clever. Not just with words, but he loved painting, too. He used to be a painter before his wife got hold of him and destroyed him with boredom and responsibilities" (40). He's written a novel and pins much hope on its being published, but its rejection seems to reflect on any artistic talent Alan really has. Bobbo is an accountant, who equates life with money.

A monetary scale for lovemaking, Bobbo thought, would have to set the sum of earning-capacity-wasted plus energy-consumed against the balance of pleasure-gained plus renewed-creativity. A cabinet minister's coitus, however feeble, could work out at some \$200, a housewife's entr'acte, however

energetic, a mere \$25. An act of love with Mary Fisher, a high earner and energetic with it, would be worth \$500. An act of love with his wife would be graded at \$75, but of course occurred more often so unfortunately would yield a diminishing return. The more often sex with a particular person happened, Bobbo believed, the less it was worth. (16-17).

Of course it is the man who protests loudly his commitment to order who is the first to run off from his responsibilities, and both Alan and Bobbo are front-runners. At least they have jobs and income and support their families as long as their marriages remain intact. Weldon's novels are populated with men supported by wives. Angelica supports the Rice estate, not only with her earnings from her earlier career as a rock-star, but in promoting it as a tourist attraction. "[T]here was so much for Angelica to do, and Edwin too if he wanted, but he didn't. Edwin merely seemed to potter and brood; he began to have a puzzled look, as did Humphrey, whose architectural practice was failing. It is a terrible thing to have to search for occupation. Lambert, too, was in financial difficulty. His publishers dropped him from their list; his agent was too busy to speak to him. He was misunderstood. He spent more time with the children, leaving Rosamund free to do night duty; indeed obliged to do so, if bills were to be met" (*Splitting* 41). Alexandra has supported Ned and Sascha with her role as Nora in *A Doll's House*. In life, Ned was a drama critic; in death his work is praised and condolences pour in from all over. The press comes and the funeral gets wide coverage. But the publicity is perhaps as much because of Ned's identification with Angelica Ludd, the actress. Her agent sums up Ned's career in less than glowing terms: "Ned's trouble was he was eaten up with envy. Couldn't write, couldn't act, couldn't direct. Just loved theatre. And you, [Alexandra], you could stand on your head and do it all" (WF 147). That last statement could be applied to many of Weldon's women.

When the economic power in a marriage shifts in favor of the wife, the sexual balance is thrown as well, and the husband restores his sense of virility by having an affair. Alan, Bobbo, Spicer, Edwin, Ned: none of the husbands in these novels is faithful. Alan has a fling, most unoriginally, with his secretary. The scion of the Rice estate and son of Lord Cowarth, He is a man committed to marriage and the social order, but when provoked, is capable of a temporary lapse. Bobbo is the victim of a femme fatale; made desperately susceptible by endless rows of well-ordered numbers to the promise this pretty spider weaves with her pen. Spicer has slept with his wife's best friend. Edwin has an affair with the great adulteress of Barley in retaliation for the affair he supposes Angelica has had with Lambert Plaidy. But his long-term relationship with Anthea Box is more serious. The scion of the Rice estate and son of Lord Cowarth, Edwin represents the social order of England, though men of his class frequently surmount the obstacles of middle-class morality. Ned has had so many conquests, that Alexandra at one point compares his sexual activity to that of a bull servicing a herd of cows: "In a field with sixty cows the bull is placid, properly serviced, properly servicing. Sex for all keeps everyone quiet. Perhaps that had been Ned's notion" (WF 164).

Facing the Truth About Friends and Other Women

Weldon doesn't lay the blame for all this marital straying solely on the husbands. Nor does she seem to argue that men are beasts and women their unwilling victims. Other women prove to be just as culpable as men, just as prone to human weakness and, yes, evil.

Often the woman having an affair with a man is a friend of the wife's.

The back-stabbing woman may be an opportunist who uses the wife's confidences for her own advantage. She may justify her betrayal--outrageously--as an act of friendship, as Abbie does, when she explains to Alexandra: "I did it for you, Alexandra . . . To break the Jenny spell. . . . I am your friend. I'd do anything for you" (*Trouble* 160). A wife's initial anger over the adultery eventually yields to acknowledgement of her own past infidelity or it may lead her into temptation, resulting in her own act of infidelity now. Weldon reveals the fact of a wife's past infidelity long after the reader's sympathy is solidly with the wife. The effect is to swing the reader back to a neutral position and a more skeptical reading of the woman's story. This strategy is not an unreliable narrator; rather, the wives have unreliable memories. They selectively remember this event or that, and of course their memory is different from their husband's memory, which is slanted in his own favor. This theme of selective memory appears in all the novels, but it is especially important in *Trouble*. Among the quack therapists Annette encounters is a hypnotist who offers to treat her problem by first locating the psychological trauma and then, "if appropriate, he would re-lay the memory so it ceased to be traumatic" (187). Peter, the therapist, explains that re-laying memory is unethical in Europe, but that luckily her management team had been imported from the U.S.

"I asked him if you could re-lay pleasant memories with nasty ones, turn a pleasant seaside outing into a horrid one, a good sexual experience into something oppressive and smothering--by restructuring a past, turn a wife against a husband, a husband against a wife--and he said oh yes, he assumed so, but who would bother?" (188)

Clearly Annette thinks this is what Dr. Rhea Marks has done to Spicer. Weldon takes issue with the whole business of "recovered memory" as a reliable means of discovering the truth. But perhaps she is also tracing what

happens in time to partners who become disenchanted with each other. How else explain the explosion, after years of contented marriage, of hurt and anger and fault-finding? In her novels, divorcing women talk of being robbed of happy memories. The break-up sours the whole marriage and makes the partners distrust their recollections of even the earliest days of the relationship. This robbing of memory is part of the "stolen property" motif in the novels, especially *Trouble*, *Splitting*, and *Worst Fears*.

As Weldon's heroines arrive at a deeper understanding of themselves, warts and all, they also modulate their opinions concerning the wife who preceded them and the wife who came after. Weldon makes sure that those who "do to" another woman are later "done to" by yet another. A wife who is smug and secure early in her marriage later eats her words. Angelica shares her friend Susan's view of Susan's husband Humphrey's first wife:

S[usan]'d run off with Humphrey, taking him away from Helen, his fat, faithless and insensitive wife—or so everyone described her, taking Susan's word for it. No one of the circle had actually ever met Helen, of course, nor wished to—she belonged to some other world layered behind this one, its sufferings incomprehensible, irrelevant: whining voices on answerphones demanding consideration, remembrance, the money second wives saw as their due. Unloved women, those in the past, should simply fade away, as should widowed mothers. At least there was no one like this in Edwin's past: she was his first wife, his only wife. These emotional and marital difficulties were for others, not for Angelica. Yes, she was conceited, and foolish." (*Splitting* 42).

Later, well into divorce proceedings with Edwin, after he takes his turn among the men of Barley in succumbing to Susan's charms, Angelica as Jelly remarks, "being an ex-wife . . . is like being dead, but no one speaking good of you;" "let no woman if not a wife, and not even then, think she is ever unconditionally wanted" (185, 187). Annette and Spicer mate on the rebound from other marriages. Annette explains to her mother, "She made him

unhappy . . . [o]kay? She's depressive, manipulative, and greedy, and tried to turn his little boy against him" (3). Later, in the waning days of her relationship with Spicer, she muses, "You start off anti the first wife, don't you? You think she didn't understand him; you think she was cold, heartless, stupid, faithless--she must have been. In the end you see she was just another woman, trying to cope" (154). Alexandra broke up Ned's marriage to Chrissie, but had never met her. "Ned had been at pains to keep the two women apart. He had described a neurasthenic, malicious woman, who drank too much and was forever on the edge of a breakdown. He, Ned, had married her out of pity . . . So Ned had said" (*Worst Fears* 142). Alexandra glibly accepts this assessment until she meets Chrissie, when she literally finds her sleeping in her bed in the London apartment she and Ned appropriated from Chrissie following the divorce. Chrissie explains that, according to the divorce decree, the apartment reverts to her, the first wife, upon Ned's death. In a flash, Alexandra's perspective changes: "Alexandra was a marriage-breaker, a bitch, a cow, a slag; she'd ruined Chrissie's life without a thought. Now it was her, Alexandra's, turn" (*Worst Fears* 148). Susan, Alan's secretary/ lover, adopts the young woman's arrogant attitude towards Esther, who is a much older woman. Susan is convinced that only a woman in peak physical form can keep a man's interest. Of course, she eventually learns that looks are not enough, and when she realizes it, she rather surprisingly comes to beg Esther to return to Alan.

Esther understands that Susan's motivation for having the affair "had nothing to do with sex. . . . She just wanted to wriggle back, somehow, into a family situation. That she chose a genital method of doing so was merely coincidental. She could have done it more simply by doing our charring for us. . . . It was Mummy's and Daddy's bed she wanted to be in. She wanted to

know what happened there" (*Fat Woman* 171). Esther is harsher when Susan actually comes to see her: "You were a symptom, not a cause. A chicken-pox spot, if you like, but not the virus. You itched him, so he scratched. Now the spots have subsided, but the virus, I am afraid, remains" (173). Esther places the "other woman" in a peripheral position, making her something less than a point in a love triangle. In her view, Susan is really beside the point. So is love, really, to which Esther is completely indifferent. She returns to Alan because in her philosophy, nothing matters. "I suppose I might as well be there [home] as here. It doesn't seem to make much difference where one is" (188).

For Ruth, however, the fact of the other woman is all-consuming. She is more obsessed with Mary Fisher even than Bobbo, not just because she stole Bobbo away from her, but for what she represents: the ideal of feminine beauty. Physically, Ruth is a caricature, whose features war with that ideal of beauty:

I am six feet two inches tall, which is fine for a man but not for a woman. I am as dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and have one of those jutting jaws that tall, dark women often have, and eyes sunk rather far back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy, and the muscles in my legs are well developed. (*She-Devil* 5)

Ruth sums up the significance of her self-description thus: "My nature and my looks do not agree. I was unlucky, you might think, in the great lottery that is woman's life" (5). Losing her husband to a femme fatale is one consequence of living in an unjust universe and Ruth's plot resonates beyond the level of revenge against her rival. Ruth explains: "We are here in this world to improve upon [God's] original idea. To create justice, truth, and beauty where He so obviously and lamentably failed" (131). The means she uses, however, are wrong ones. She merely tips the scales of justice in her

own favor, perpetuating the imbalance that exists in the universe.

Facing the Truth About Relationships With Parents and Children

As the women in these Weldon novels deal with the demise of their marriage they not surprisingly look to their mothers and fathers for wisdom and support, with unsatisfactory results. In her multi-generational novels, Weldon shows how the sins of the mother are visited upon her daughters. The crisis in a woman's life proves to resonate somehow with her mother's life experience. Many of the mothers are divorced themselves or have weathered marital crises that leave them determined to save their daughters from the same fate. Mothers appear in a role of commentator upon the upheavals in the daughters' lives. They make shrewd observations, but can sometimes offer poor advice. They mean well, but often prove ineffective. Fathers are largely absent, but there may be a step-father. Emotional scarring often leaves Weldon's heroines unable to function as mothers. The effect is a general deconstruction of popular myths about the nuclear family, and especially about motherhood. There are limits, Weldon argues, to one's capacity for selfless, unquestioning love and human limitation must be recognized. We are wrong to expect perfection in anyone.

Esther's shrewd appraisal of Susan's involvement with Alan as reflective of a curiosity about "Mummy and Daddy" reflects her own experience with her parents. As a child, she won her own father's love and approval by taking care of him while her mother took vacations with another man. She competed for and won her father's love, triumphing over her rival—her mother. When the father contracted the rheumatic fever that eventually killed him, Mother got her revenge by blaming Esther for his illness: "'You

should have aired the sheets. You were twelve. That's quite big. You knew sheets ought to be aired. It was damp sheets that gave him rheumatic fever. The doctor said so." (162) The implication is that Esther (like Susan) may have, out of curiosity, slipped between the sheets of her own mummy and daddy's bed for, when her father dies, she tries to kill herself by drinking bleach--perhaps to eradicate the stain of some unspoken sin? Esther and her mother are bound together by mutual guilt, blame, and contempt. Although she believes she is not like her mother, her friend Phyllis points out that Esther takes "little holidays" from Alan just as her mother did, and that "Perhaps if you were seven stone lighter you would be more like her than you imagine" (164). Esther acknowledges the wisdom of that observation. The overeating she engages in throughout the novel to the point of making herself sick becomes, then, a futile attempt to escape from her mother. Like so many of Weldon's heroines, however, the sins of the mother are visited upon the daughter and the harmful patterns continue.

Ruth's parents are divorced; Ruth had to move away from home because "[h]er bedroom had been needed to accommodate her stepfather's model train set. . . . One of them had to go, and Ruth was the easier to move. It can take months to adjust train tracks properly and permanently: a young woman can settle anywhere" (29). Shortly after, Ruth's mother ran off with a mining engineer to Australia, taking her two younger daughters; Ruth's stepfather saw no reason to continue a relationship with Ruth. So much for any hope of Ruth's finding parental support. When Ruth leaves her children with Bobbo and Mary Fisher in order to ruin their idyllic interlude, what happens is that Mary Fisher becomes a more responsible individual. Ruth, however, commits the unpardonable sin. In society's view, only an unnatural mother would abandon her children to a situation of questionable

value. Ruth's action may be viewed with compassion only when seen as her taking a cue from her own mother: the sin of the mother visited upon the daughter.

Lady Angelica's mother, Lavender, is widowed when she begins seeing a married man, who eventually divorces his wife and marries her. The second Mrs. Hatherley comes to live in the former home of her predecessor, thereby usurping the place of this other woman. Angelica, of course, sees parallels with her own situation, though she is herself the one usurped. Angelica is keenly sensitive to the pain of knowing that another woman is using and enjoying her former things, while Lavender matter of factly acknowledges the advantages she enjoys at another woman's expense:

"Don't you feel peculiar living here?" Jelly asked her mother.
 "Using Audrey's teapot? In Audrey's bed? Doesn't she haunt you?" But apparently not.
 "It's really nice living in another woman's home," said the new Mrs. Hatherley.
 "Other people manage to have the light switches in all the right places, and enough sockets to go round. Audrey didn't stint herself, I must say. Nearly drove poor Gerald to bankruptcy, but what did she care?" (238)

Easy for Lavender to criticize the first wife, while benefiting from the very fault she hauls out for Angelica's inspection. Audrey drove "poor Gerald" near bankruptcy, so Lavender doesn't have to.

Lavender has passed along some things to her daughter, as well: character traits that have negatively influenced the direction her life took. In their final scene together, the sexual excesses of the daughter are seen against the backdrop of the mother's own indiscretions. The result is a new perspective that turns the moral indignation of the older generation against itself. "All those drugs, all that drink, and all that sex. I wouldn't want to remember it if I were you. Until the day you got married and became your

husband's responsibility, you were a nightmare for all of us," Lavender begins the scene by saying (237). Another mother with conventional middle class morals? Not so, we discover later, when Angelica asks for information to fill in the memory gaps that surround her childhood. Lavender tries to put her off.

"You must tell me. Who was my real father?"

"At least it wasn't someone from a sperm bank," said her mother.

"That I would be ashamed of. I was very young. I was quite the tomboy. A football fan. There was a little group of us. Groupies, they call them now. We used to try and have the whole football team. None of us ever managed the lot."

"You're telling me you don't know who my father was?"

"They were all good-looking lads. I don't know how these things work. Perhaps you got a little bit from all of them?"

". . . How many?"

"About six, Jelly," said Lavender. (243-4)

Clearly, Weldon is going for laughs here. The novel has crossed the median many times between realism and farce, and this revelation results in a head-on collision. Still, she seems to be making a point in the nature v. nurture debate that she examines as well in other novels.

Mothers repeatedly offer unsound advice and criticize the daughters for the way they conduct their marriages and raise their children, but their motivation is at least partly good: they hope their daughters can benefit from their own experience. Annette's mother is not blind to Spicer's faults, but because her own husband was unfaithful when she was pregnant with Annette, she counsels Annette how to keep her marriage together. "How's dear Spicer? He did seem a little stressed last time I saw him--you shouldn't let him be so rude to you. But he did ring me up in the afternoon, and was sweet to me. Really affectionate. He's a good man, Annette. I hope you value him properly. A good husband's hard to find" (69). Mother couldn't

be more wrong and ought to remember that "good intentions" are what the road to hell is paved with. And yet Annette's mother notices early on the swollen wrists that are the first sign of Annette's septicemia. Annette reassures her that all is well and doesn't get medical help until it's too late.

Mothers pepper their advice with faults dredged up from the past. Weldon interjects a little irony in these maternal exchanges, as when Annette's mother advises her how to improve her relationship with her daughter, Susan. "You should take her out and about. No reason why mothers and daughters shouldn't be friends" (68). This nugget comes in the middle of a diatribe that ends with, "Sometimes you surprise me by your selfishness. But you were like that even as a child: what Annette wants, Annette has to have. . . ." (69). Alexandra's mother, too, unwittingly impales herself on Weldon's pen when she discusses her concerns over Annette's young son, Sascha:

"Oh God, Mother," said Alexandra. "What have you been reading?"

"A book," said Irene. "*Mother: Friend or Foe?* It's very interesting. I'm not sure you're the best person to be his mother. . . ." (120)

Irene wants Alexandra to let her have Sascha to bring up because she's convinced that Alexandra can't do the job properly. Alexandra resists the idea spiritedly throughout the novel, though it's evident that she perceives Sascha in terms of what he can supply her with: namely, animal comfort. Separated from Sascha, Alexandra longs to hold him as if he were a teddy bear. She sleeps in his bed because "she wanted the smell of his soft child's skin in her nostrils" (76). But clearly the reality of Sascha dispels her sentimental notions. When she finally visits him at her mother's house, his tantrum makes her think. "Really he was a stranger to her. She found it

difficult to believe they were intimately connected, in the way people said. The fact was, she seemed to have suddenly un-bonded with Sascha. She hadn't known that this was possible. She presumed it would pass. It would have to. In the meantime she could act, as she was trained to do. She would play loving mother" (149). In the end, Alexandra reluctantly agrees to let her mother keep Sascha, "and Sascha with all her heart, weeping but doing it, leaving her child because everyone was right on that subject. Sometimes grandmothers are better than mothers, with children" (200). Mothers are shrewd; they perceive before anyone else does a potentially dangerous situation. Annette's mother, too, is the first to see that Annette's wrists are swollen, the first indication of her septicemia.

Weldon undercuts and even destroys cherished myths about motherhood, and reveals how self-interest and selfishness sometimes inflict wounds that never heal properly. Her heroines must come to terms with their own mothers, but also with their children.

Children, rarely have a voice in the novels, but when they do, they utter hilarious ironies. Esther's son, Peter, who is grown, tells her: "I think there's something rather awful about middle-aged middle-class people going on diets, when all over the world people are starving to death" (92), turning the customary around the advice mothers customarily give to children with finicky appetites. •

The Stripping of the Heroine as a Process of Freeing Her

In the epic tradition, the hero arms himself for battle. In Weldon's inversion of the epic quest, the heroine is not armed, but stripped during the course of her journey. One aspect of this stripping involves the loss of all her

worldly goods as she moves towards ultimate economic independence. But the process of stripping of course embraces the character's gradual loss of all her delusions as well as her loss of actual worldly goods. In a way, the stripping becomes a process by which she wins independence and freedom. Unencumbered, she can finally move on with her life.

Stripping of Her Worldly Goods

Having the proper legal documents proves to be the key to possession of spouse and goods. Annette's marriage and Alexandra's marriage are literally non-existent, they belatedly learn, when a search turns up no proper documentation. Both Annette and Alexandra lose all claim to the marital property. All of Weldon's female protagonists must consider the economic consequences of a possible divorce. As in real life, the fictional wives' economic well-being depends heavily on the security of their marriage. Weldon's women are forced into self-sufficiency; none is allowed to live off an ex-husband indefinitely. Wives like Alexandra and Angelica, who have brought money to the marriage, find they have no claim to compensation. Every one of them is stripped of her material possessions before finding independence. Losing the family home is a favorite device. A wife's position in the world has been usurped by another and Weldon gives this a literal as well as a figurative representation. This loss happens quite dramatically. Both Alexandra (*Worst Fears*) and Ruth (*She-Devil*) burn down their homes. The motive is revenge and defiance. With no family home left, Ruth must now take the children to live with Bobbo and Mary Fisher in her tower by the sea. She drops a big wrench of reality into the machinery of their stupid romance plot. Alexandra has been excluded from her husband's will and

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denied possession of the family home in favor of his lover. She burns down the cottage to prevent the mistress from taking possession. Annette (*Trouble*) is booted from the family home on the grounds that her marriage to Spicer wasn't legal. Spicer intends to turn the house over to the Drs. Marks, his therapists, telling Annette: "There's no room for you, or the kids" (204). Children clearly share in their mother's loss. Lady Angelica Rice (*Splitting*) gave up her claim to her own money upon her marriage as easily as she took on Edwin's name and his family. Rice Court is in disrepair and Angelica pours her money into its refurbishment. Like many women, Angelica handles money unwisely and has romantic ideas that love should rise above practical considerations like finances. Robert Jellico, the land agent who controls the Rice estate, is much shrewder. He "made sure Angelica's money did not go directly towards the rebuilding of Rice Court, in case of future litigation, and any claim that might be made alleging the place to be the matrimonial home. He was not so stupid and she did not notice. Who, lately married, ever anticipates divorce?" (26). Only Esther (*Fat Woman*), in Weldon's first novel, has a home to return to, though she does so with little joy.

Stripping of Identity

Always more is at stake than merely losing the structural house: memories, a shared history, the past, even an identity are all implied in the image of the home locked forever against the deserted wife. "That Anthea now moved about her, Lady Rice's, kitchen, used her pots and pans, lay in her bed with her husband, seemed to Lady Rice the stuff of nightmare, though to the rest of the world, and indeed to Jelly, Angelica and Angel, it

seemed ordinary enough. These days, of course, men and women had serial spouses; who could forever be changing houses, buying new when partners changed?" the narrator of *Splitting* muses. And: "It was no longer the past which upset her so, but her increasing and intensifying lack of one. Edwin looked through her and by her: he was trying to make her feel she did not exist, and had ever existed, and he was succeeding. He was vanishing her" (183). "[Jelly] too could be brought down by the misery of remembrance. . . . All this she had lost; all this had been stolen: the human part of the loss was possible to forget. But all this garden history Anthea had robbed her of: Anthea and Edwin, together, had deprived her not just of future, and present, but of the past" (213). Weldon plays a full range of emotions and lets her characters indulge their feelings to the fullest. But the emotion always rings true and poignancy is balanced elsewhere with biting wit, as this passage coming just as Alexandra is about to set fire to her house shows: "She and Jenny were in some international war; Jenny winning: pushing forward, taking territory, defiling memory, altering history. Now she, Alexandra, must retreat. But she would adopt a scorched-earth policy. . . . There was no such thing as a defeat, if you didn't accept it" (191). A Weldon wife doesn't wallow in victimhood, but takes gleeful revenge, much to a reader's vicarious delight. Alexandra shows that she has overcome defeat. Now that she can freely give up the past, she has triumphed over it and can move forward.

Achieving Economic Independence and Moving On

Concerning day-to-day survival, none of the characters is without talents and skills, or the hope of earning a living by her wits. The divorce is an economic set-back, but not the end of the world. Lady Angelica Rice

(*Splitting*) is the character most concerned with winning a liberal alimony award, and her ingenuity in engineering such an award becomes the source of much humor. One of her personalities is Jelly White, who gets hired as secretary to Edwin's divorce attorney and changes the figures in her favor on all documents relating to the settlement. For a time it seems she will succeed. Lady Angelica/ Jelly takes action, but that action is meant to force a continuation of the economic security provided by marriage. She feels entitled to Edwin's money and not without reason. Before her marriage she made quite a lot of money as a rock star, and it is this money she has poured into repairing Rice Court. Divorce is often unjust to the wife, Weldon acknowledges, but what's to be done about it? Clearly Lady Angelica is clever enough to take care of herself, and should do so. Her musical talent provides the basis for future income. Other Weldon heroines also have talents and resources. Alexandra is a successful actress; her portrayal of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* lands her a film contract to star with Michael Douglas. As *Worst Fears* closes, she is about to fly to Hollywood to begin rehearsal. Annette, too, can take care of herself, having just landed a book contract for her first novel. When Bobbo first leaves her, She-Devil Ruth must make do with the support money he is willing to pay.

He said he would pay her \$52 a week until further notice, which was twenty percent above the legal minimum. Thanks to the new legislation which gave second wives a fairer deal, he was required to support only his children. Able-bodied first wives were expected to stand on their own feet.

"But it costs at least one hundred and sixty-five dollars a week to run the house," said Ruth.

"That's why it will have to be sold," said Bobbo. "But do bear in mind that when I'm not there costs will come right down.

Women and children don't consume nearly as much as men; statistics prove it. Besides, now that the children are at school . . . it's time you went back to work. It's not good for a woman to molder away at home."

"But the children will be ill; school holidays are half the year; and besides, there *are* no jobs."

"There is always work for those who want it," said Bobbo. (53-4)

Weldon takes the opportunity to criticize early changes in divorce laws which were intended to treat men and women as equals, even if women, if they were working at all, didn't earn equal salaries. Throughout the course of the novel, however, Ruth proves her resourcefulness and as the book ends, is sitting on top of the world. Although the reader anticipates her eventual fall from fortune--and grace--nevertheless this once dependent wife has learned to live by her wits.

Weldon's Relationship to Comedy

Despite the sorrows, difficulties, and even tragic losses that Weldon's heroines experience, the novels are, in their overall structure, and in their technique and tone, comic novels.

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye breaks down the structure of comedy into six phases, ranging from "the most savage irony to the most dreamy wish-fulfillment romance," but notes that "its structural patterns and characterization are much the same throughout its range" (177). Together the six phases make up the total mythos of comedy, (Figure 1) which Frye recognizes as having a ternary form:

the hero's society rebels against the society of the *senex* and triumphs, but the hero's society is a Saturnalia, a reversal of social standards which recalls a golden age in the past before the main action of the play begins. Thus we have a stable and harmonious order disrupted by folly, obsession, forgetfulness, 'pride and prejudice,' or events not understood by the characters themselves, and then restored. . . . A very long play . . . may present all three phases. . . . But of course very often the first phase is not given at all: the audience simply understands

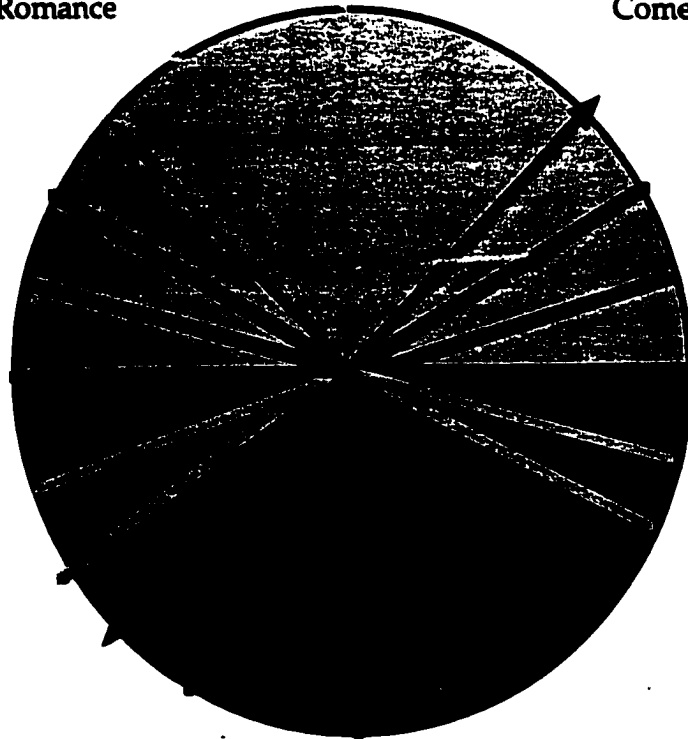
InnocenceMythos of Summer
RomanceMythos of Spring
ComedyMythos of Autumn
TragedyMythos of Winter
Satire and IronyExperience

Figure 1. Northrop Frye's Theory of Myths

Frye recognizes 4 narrative pregeneric elements of literature which he calls mythoi or generic plots. These 4 mythoi form two opposed pairs. Tragedy and comedy contrast rather than blend, and so do romance and irony, the champions respectively of the ideal and the actual. Comedy blends insensibly into satire at one extreme and into romance at the other; romance may be comic or tragic; tragic extends from high romance to bitter and ironic realism. Frye recognizes 6 phases of each mythos, 3 being parallel to the phases of a neighboring mythos. The first 3 phases of comedy are parallel to the first 3 phases of irony and satire, and the second 3 to the second 3 of romance.

an ideal state of affairs which it knows to be better than what is revealed in the play, and which it recognizes as like that to which the action leads." (171)

Frye, then, recognizes a wide range of comedic tones and a basic plot structure that only seems to champion a break from tradition. The "Saturnalia" of the hero's society is really a return to traditional values that, somehow, the older generation has lost sight of. Frye further states that the movement "from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is fundamentally . . . a movement from illusion to reality. . . . Hence the importance of the theme of creating and dispelling illusion in comedy: the illusions caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage" (169-170). This is the action that occurs in Weldon's novels, where the illusion and hypocrisy of a particular marriage is exposed as a warping of the ideal of marriage. Such a marriage is not valid, but a form of bondage and the partners need to be set free.

Comedy moves towards reconciliation and reconciliation acknowledges the importance of a community: the *dyskolos* in Menander's play is brought back into the community; the Athenians and Spartans in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* cease hostilities and return to their respective marriage beds—but first they celebrate peace as a community. Comedy usually moves towards a happy ending, one that Frye explains evokes from the audience a response of "this should be," not in a moral, but in a *social* sense. The social dimension is imperative in comedy, and where there is society, there are laws that bind individuals to achieve a greater good. As any Shakespeare comedy demonstrates, comedy may show us, and have great fun with, an upended social order, but in the end order is restored--

hopefully in a new and improved form. In the ironic mode, however, Frye notes that the humorous society simply disintegrates without anything taking its place" (178). In ironic comedy, the action "moves toward a deliverance from something which, if absurd, is by no means invariably harmless." Frye notes: "We notice too how frequently a comic dramatist tries to bring his action as close to a catastrophic overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and then reverses the action as quickly as possible" (178). This passage from Frye helps to identify Weldon's work as comedy of the ironic phase and to explain how her endings are consistent with comedy. Marriage as it is lived out by Weldon's characters has become a perversion of the law. In their efforts to keep their marriage together, the women are grasping at straws. They have resisted taking personal responsibility for their lives and their problems. The women may find themselves alone as their novels close, but they are now better equipped to deal with life. Their movement from law to freedom is consistent with comedy. Freedom from the bondage of a bad marriage is good; but it's not enough. What matters more is that the women know themselves better and recognize their contribution to their marriage's failure. They are free from their delusions and self-deception, they are more mature. They no longer think of themselves as "victims" or as powerless. Now they're ready to live an authentic adult life—and Weldon extends many of her female protagonists a second chance. Purged of her illusions, Alexandra burns down her empty house and starts down the road at the end of *Worst Fears*, leaving behind the ashes of her ruined life. Throughout the novel, she has been haunted by a vision of Ned wandering into a woods without glancing back to tell her good bye. Now, having learned that the answer to worst fears is best wishes, she calls Ned's name: "He turned and saw her and smiled. A dream but not a dream. . . . Best Wishes. She was

elated. That was the secret: *Best Wishes*" (188). Alexandra doesn't merely survive, she overcomes. A movie contract with Michael Douglas is not a bad future. Annette, too, in *Trouble*, triumphs in the wreck of her marriage. During the course of the novel as her life unravels, she is bolstered by one character who truly has her welfare in mind. Ernie Gromback is her publisher and will support, not resent, her creative work. Even the death of her baby is softened, with the promise that she may have another. Esther, of *The Fat Woman's Joke*, the least optimistic of the novels, is consoled that she has been able to cultivate growth, as Susan has not, in the dormant lily plant that she facetiously refers to as Susan's and Alan's "baby." Angelica, the heroine of *Splitting*, will begin studies at the Royal college of Music with her new lover, Ram. Comedy and tragedy: rooted together, impossible to separate.

Drawing on Frye's assertion that, while tragedy deals with only part of the cycle of myth, comedy deals with the full cycle, William Lynch states that: "Tragedy plunges in to leave us fully cognizant of the abyss between the power of our wills and the actuality of our needs; comedy plunges in to discover that when we wholly submit to it the finite itself generates the insight we need" (qtd. in Galligan 25). Edward Galligan adds, "Literature abounds with numerous scenes in which a comic hero works his way out of difficulties by plunging deeper into them" (25). Both writers seem to imply that, when tragedy has reached rock bottom, the only way to move is up, through comedy.

"...there are three different levels on which life can be lived. The first is the level of surfaces and superficiality' on which technological nations too often try to live. Beneath that is the much deeper level of those who take pride and grim pleasure in 'facing the facts.' but deeper still is the level on which human pride and will and capacity arrive at real helplessness; this is the tragic level of existence. Yet comedy, too, explores this third level, for this is the place of hope." 28

This third level is the place where Weldon's heroines find themselves, stripped of every pretense, and left with nothing but their wits--but that's enough. Weldon's heroines keep company with comic heroines such as Rosalind, Celimante, Millamant, and Elizabeth Bennet, whom Galligan classes as "descendants of Pallas Athene, the gray-eyed goddess who was mistress of all feigning. "those comic heroines who know that in a hard, dangerous world mortals must use their wits to protect and preserve themselves and those they love, and who have the wit to do it. Words are their weapons and they use them brilliantly" (107).

Barbara Levy believes that wit--and humor in its many gradations--helps contemporary women novelist to confront the events of their lives and to tell their characters' stories in a way that gives them the last laugh. Levy further takes exception to Judith Wilt's provocative argument in "The Laughter of Maidens, The Cackle of Matriarchs" that "matriarchal humor is merely survival humor, since the older woman stays in her unhappy position and can only pile 'sandbags of wit against the flood of anger and pain' (193). . . [T]he matriarch laughs at male foibles as well as the injustices done her, but does not imagine that she can change her position in society" (7). Joking and laughter are means of surviving a threatening or harmful situation. But Levy sees the wit of women writers as a great deal more powerful.

"A witty writer gains some degree of control over the events in her life. . . by retelling her story her own way, by putting herself, as Ephron said, as the intelligence at the center of it. . . . But there is an added aggressive quality to the control of witty writers. This is partly due to the stance of feigned vulnerability they adopt. . . . [U]ltimately they are going to emerge in the position of superiority. In point of fact, they have been there all along. . . . [W]hat they all enjoy is the empowerment of wit. Neither they nor their main characters will accept the role of victim without a witty protest. But the form of their wit varies, and their success is related to the social climate of their day" (1-

3; 165).

In their overall structure, Weldon's novels fit many definitions of comedy. In addition, the novels abound with many comic devices and with every gradation of humor, from the farcical to the darkest irony. Character, scene, incident, even language: all are sources of humor in Weldon's hands and contribute to the overall comedic effect of her novels. Yet it should be clear that her purpose is a serious one. As she's told one interviewer, "I certainly do see my novels as morality tales or parables, which you then work over in your mind and come to your own conclusions about" (Pearlman 80-81). She doesn't believe in actions with no consequences (85) and insists that "It's a very dangerous doctrine that suggests we are out of control of our own lives or out of the control of our societies. We are not" (82).

In the closing pages of *A Literature of Their Own, British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977), Elaine Showalter comments that "So far, English women writers have not become involved in the Women's Liberation Movement, or at least not with the openness, zeal, and intellectual vigor of American writers" (316). At the time, Fay Weldon had yet to produce many of her novels, although it was already clear that her purpose was consistent with a feminism that recognizes that men are just as much victims of human nature as are women. "Human behavior has very little to do with gender. I think it has to do with power. If you put a woman in a man's position, she will be more efficient, but no more kind. . . . [It is] people who are wicked" (85). This opinion has earned her notoriety as the great betrayer of the cause; but a feminist she is. Articulate, outspoken, witty, and wise, Weldon destroys the notion that feminists have no sense of humor.

Weldon wields her pen like a double-edged ...sword? No, a gardening hoe, capable both of cutting down brambles and of cultivating the soil for new growth. In twenty-two novels, she has produced a species of late-bloomers of rare but hardy beauty.

CHAPTER II

A LAWYER, A VET, AND A COUPLE OF DOGS, ONE OF THEM DEAD

One

Dane and Marijayne Hoffman were without a doubt the handsomest couple in the congregation at the ten o'clock service of Second First United Methodist Church on this glorious Sunday in May: he tall and silver-haired, she as slender as the day they married twenty-two years ago. Dane's arms were extended along the back of the pew around his wife and daughters Eloise, Beatrice, and Laura, who wore matching flowered dresses with pink ruffled collars and satin sashes. In the pulpit, the Rev. Ronald Damschroder, senior minister, was almost overcome by this surfeit of pink. He felt his heart lurch, or maybe his stomach. Giddily he thought of rosebuds, catawba grapes. I am the vine you are the ... petals on a gray-flannel bough. Nearby the Mayor and Mrs. Davenport were holding hands, but then it's an election year and they they had to make a show of marital harmony. The Hoffmans weren't trying to win votes. Being in the line of work he was, the Rev. Damschroder guessed he knew love when he saw it, and this was Love. The sun came through the stained glass window of the Apocalypse behind the sanctuary, bathing the whole family in rosy light. It was a sign, or at least a way out of his dilemma about which family should appear on the brochure the ad hoc membership committee intended to publish as part of the campaign to boost flagging enrollment.

The project has caused controversy among church members,

especially the older and more generous Sunday donors, who deplored applying marketing techniques for spiritual ends. Some of the smaller sects have advertised on local TV, but never the Methodists. Not in the Michigan town of Vieux Chien, with a population of a mid-sized college. At the church council meeting when Jim Fischer first introduced the proposal, battle lines were drawn and Scripture passages shot back and forth like machine gun fire. When Mayor Davenport got up and told everyone "If he were alive today, Jesus himself would hire a PR man," the Rev. Damschroder quickly stepped into the fray with some Scripture passages and wisdom of his own meant to reassure the older members. In his heart of hearts he felt they were right, but he also knew that hard times called for hard methods. He told them: "What is the gospel if not an ad campaign of sorts? Gospel means 'good news' and Jesus himself told the Apostles to spread the Word. 'By their fruits you will know them,' 'Be wise as serpents but innocent as lilies.' God can work good out of evil, and so forth. Besides, in this case, it's not 'evil,' only pragmatic."

In the end, the proposal had passed by a narrow margin, and the ad campaign was one step closer to reality. But now a new argument began over which family should be photographed for the front of the brochure. After more debate Vera Krause shot her mannish arm into the air and beamed at the Rev. Damschroder from under a helmet of frizzy blonde hair. "I vote that you should be the one to choose, Reverend," she cooed. Damschroder nodded, smiling, and mentally crossed her name from the list of possibilities.

He and Mrs. Damschroder discussed the matter, and he rejected each suggestion: Mayor Davenport's family was her choice, as the most prominent family, but the Rev. Damschroder wanted to keep politics out of it. For the same reason, he vetoed anyone on the church council or the

officers of the ladies' relief society. "No way in hell is one of those harpy-toed Furies getting her picture on that brochure. We want to attract families, not scare them away." He told this to his face in the mirror as he shaved, and not to his wife, who was already showing early signs of what he thought of as "pious matronhood:" a certain generalized slackening, from her mouth to her shoulders to her potluck belly, as if a lifetime of obeying God's will had, in the process of saving her soul, broken her spirit.

Looking out at the faces in the pews this morning, he saw plenty of piety and lots of what might be goodness; but no family came near the Hoffmans in good looks or the kind of innocent sexuality that might draw even the most maverick of Unitarian to a Sunday morning service at Second First United Methodist Church. And that was Damschroder's dream. He took very seriously his calling to be "a fisher of men," and hooking a Unitarian would be like bringing in a killer shark.

Damschroder stared at Marijayne Hoffman's upturned face bathed in rosy light and felt himself falling in love with the whole family. Why, Dr. Dane Hoffman was the very image of the Christian man for the new millennium, successful in his professional life as in his family life. He'd tell the ad campaign committee when it met on Tuesday, that after much prayer, he had decided the choice for the photo on the brochure should be the typical family; not the most distinguished, but the one most representative of the membership at Second First Methodist. Then he'd make his recommendation. That gave him two days to come up with an argument that the Hoffmans were typical of anything about this congregation. The Rev. Damschroder felt a great peace—or at least relief—as he raised his right hand over his flock and invited them to join him in giving thanks.

Marijayne Hoffman was grateful enough, she guessed, for the gifts

God had been pleased to give her: a husband who was tall and handsome and a doctor--albeit a veterinarian and not a heart surgeon; three daughters who shared her taste for ruffles and Avon; a part-time job at the newspaper selling ads, which gave her a jump on all the sales at her favorite store; and a tudor-style house on historic Grand Boulevard, which she was restoring to its former elegance and more, with help from their parents and a hefty mortgage. Marijayne thanked God for the hand-painted tile in the master bath, the reproduction Versailles chandelier in the front hall, the hot tub on the patio, and the little brass doorknobs on the cherry kitchen cabinets, which she polished every week, rubbing them round and round with a soft cloth, the way she now absently rubbed the knobby knuckles of Dane's hand.

Sex had been the furthest thing from his mind, but Dane was so conditioned to respond to her that as she rubbed his knuckles, his palm went limp. They gazed, rapt, at the Rev. Damschroder, she thinking of doorknobs, he of sex and how Marijayne had him trained like one of Pavlov's dogs, though dogs were not something Dane wanted to think of just now, especially not the dead one in his freezer at the clinic. Tomorrow the Murrays would come to pick up their little dog, and they didn't even know she was dead. He told them Friday that Sweetie had pulled through the operation like a trooper, that just to be safe, he wanted to keep her over the weekend for observation. Then he'd gone back into the operating room and wrapped the dog in a sheet and stuck it in the freezer. He couldn't think what else to do with it.

The Second First United Methodist Church was the largest of five churches that framed Spire Square. Across the square on the East were First Emmanuel Lutheran and First Church of Christ Episcopal. On the North

quadrant was Last Shall Be First Catholic and on the South, First Presbyterian. So many "firsts," so much emphasis on position: you'd think the Christian brethren were competing in some heavenly derby, that instead of ringing the square as they did, they ought to be lining up at the starting gate. The arrangement and variety of churches suggested "Unity in Diversity," the city motto, until one noted that none of the churches actually faced the square. Rather, they all turned their backs to the square and to their neighbors, so that when church doors opened after services, the worshipers spilled out onto the side streets and the Methodists never had to nod to the Catholics, nor the Catholics to the Lutherans.

Inside Last Shall Be First Catholic Church, the sun did not shine upon Sharon Hedstrom, who attended Mass with three of her children: Hunter, twelve, Hannah, eight, and Wolfe, three. She knelt in the gloom in the back of the church so she wouldn't be too embarrassed when Wolfe began to play with the kneeler during the sermon, raising and lowering it over and over again, squeak THUD, squeak THUD, dropping it right on Sharon's toes if she tried to interrupt the rhythm with her foot. Father Arnold "Nose" Best preached that religion ought not to be comfortable, and for Sharon and her children, it was anything but—especially for Dolly, the eldest at sixteen, who refused to come to Mass with them.

If "Dada" was the first word her babies uttered and "Mama" the second, then "Daddy doesn't have to go to church, why do I?" was one of their first sentences. Dolly first lisped this question when she was three and-a-half. Only by begging, bribing, ordering, threatening, and creating general unhappiness for all, did Sharon manage to get Dolly through eight years of Catholic schooling and three of the seven sacraments. In turn each of the

younger children took up the refrain, and Sharon didn't know how much longer she could coerce any of them into attending Mass.

Wolfe couldn't seem to stop squirming. He sat on the kneeler for awhile, then stood on it, grabbed the back of the pew in front of them and pressed his lips against it, bleating softly. Sharon hushed him and pulled him onto her lap, but after a few minutes, he wiggled off and lie full-length on the kneeler. Hannah pulled all the hymnals from the rack and lined them up like train cars along the pew. She slid them back and forth, back and forth. Sharon would turn and demand that she stop, except that the elderly couple behind her might freeze her with a look. Other families sat quietly for the entire service. Trixie Bonami's children behaved. The blank looks on their faces suggested that they didn't have a clue what the Mass was all about. If God really wanted to get their attention, He'd have to try something more dramatic than transubstantiation, or at least add special effects: a power failure at the moment of consecration, aurora borealis over the altar. Still, Trixie's kids behaved. Why? Sharon desperately wanted to know. Maybe it was because, after they exhausted their mother's patience, their father was there to exert his influence. Gus was a recent convert. After years of attending Mass with the family, he decided he'd dangled his toes at the edge of the pool long enough and was ready to take the plunge. Dick, however, absolutely would not go to church with Sharon.

"Strong women have always raised children by themselves," he said.

Sharon knew that the Hedstrom women were strong, indeed. Of course, many of these strong women were not Hedstroms by blood; they married into the family and their strong characters and personalities that got written into the genetic code. Dick's great-great grandmother founded a church over in White Pigeon, back in the days of the first white settlers. Two

generations later, Grandmother Hedstrom became the first and only woman to chair the Democratic party in Vieux Chien County. Dick's mother, Bliss, had what is described as "an indomitable spirit," though she channeled it in more traditional ways. In her daughters, Thomasina and Edina, the genes of so many remarkable women had created a sort of power surge. The girls started up what was now the biggest and most successful bakery in town. They called themselves the Brothers Bagnacalda. Everyone thought there were three brothers--that's how much presence these two women had. These were the strong women who could raise children without any help from a man.

Sharon's own family included some women of reckoning, too. Her grandmother had braved an ocean crossing and lifelong separation from her family to settle in America--that took strength. Even as a child, Sharon's mother had negotiated between her immigrant parents and their new, confusing world--that took strength. In matters of religion, though, it was Great-Grandma Wolfe who had distinguished herself, by dying. Moved by the peaceful manner of her passing, her husband began taking instructions in the faith once she'd been laid to rest, the first Wolfe to be buried in the consecrated ground of the Catholic cemetery in Lancaster County. She never had the satisfaction of knowing the role she played in her husband's conversion. Throughout fifty-five years of marriage, he'd stubbornly held out a Protestant, and Grandma had had all the trouble of churching their seven children herself--not an easy job: these children were Wolfes through and through. Given the example of her great-grandmother, Sharon viewed her failure to rope in Dick's soul for Mother Church as proof of her weakness.

Physically she had strength, all right. More than once in her life she'd

embarrassed herself by using it. At the church carnival, when she was twelve, she'd dragged her overweight partner over the finish line to win the three-legged race at a church carnival. When it became apparent that they weren't going to get their feet to cooperate any other way, Sharon had lifted the boy onto her back and, with her eye on the finish line, carried them both to victory, to the great amusement of the crowd. The boy never spoke to her again. There were other instances, too, before she'd finally learned to fumble the ball, to lose the race, not to test her strength at all.

Sometimes she sensed that Dick's strength depended on her lack of it. He seemed to cut his teeth, so to speak, on her. He went through growth spurts marked by restlessness and impatience. Sometimes he'd take up a new hobby: bike racing, gardening, or now, politics. It was as if he couldn't make up his mind about what he wanted. She let him do as he pleased. He worked hard, and at least he wasn't having an affair. Her turn would come, just as soon as the kids were all in school. She could bide her time.

Wolfe peeled off the rubber caster from bottom of the kneeler and began tossing three feet into the air.

Sharon sighed. "Please, God...." she prayed, but couldn't think how to finish the thought.

Dick Hedstrom rarely knew what he wanted until it was right in front of him. He didn't know, for example, that he wanted to be city law director until a group of Democrats came to see him and urged him to run for office. All at once he knew that this was the answer.

Dick was better at knowing what he didn't want, and he didn't want to go to church on Sunday morning, not any church, not any Sunday morning. He still chafed at the memory of services in the old First First United

Methodist Church, when Mother planted herself between Dick and his father and stayed them with her hand if one of them scratched their nose or tried to loosen the knot of his necktie. His sisters, Tommy and Eddie, sat together in the pew in front of them, where Mother could lay a warning hand on their necks if necessary, but it rarely was. It was during those years that Dick and his father developed the infamous Hedstrom scowl.

But Dick wanted to win the election this fall badly enough to follow the advice of the consultant hired by his campaign committee. This guy had persuaded him to shave off his side burns and to burn his Coors t-shirt. Now he wanted Dick to get out more in public: join a club, take up a sport, at least go to church with the family. Unbeknownst to Sharon, this morning he had dressed and come downtown for Sunday Mass. But just as he was about to pull open the door and enter Last Shall Be First Catholic Church and make her a happy woman, he got cold feet. Why would he want to give Sharon the wrong impression and let her think she'd influenced his decision, or that others had agreed with what she'd been saying all along, that a family ought to strive for some cohesion in matters such as religion?

He walked all the way around Spire Square, pausing outside each church and trying to see himself inside. His vision wasn't very good, anyway, but this morning it was worse. He was only wearing one contact lens because of a last minute something in his eye, so everything looked at once both oddly clear and fuzzy. The Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches were each rejected in turn. The mournful tones issuing from each church sounded exactly the same; how are they different? They disagreed on matters which seemed significant to them. That much he could understand, even respect. As a lawyer, he spent most of his life helping people sort out their differences, untangling the law the way he patiently

worked the garbled wad of fishing line on the reel after one of Hunter's overly enthusiastic casts fell short. But the joys of intricate of theological debate eluded him. To him, it was all Lilliput: the Big-Endians versus the Small-Endians. A concept as vast as God must surely surpass such squabbles over minutia.

Formidable as they appeared with their spires poking at the sky, how could any of these churches contain the Almighty? He felt paradoxically oppressed and dwarfed by the facades of stone and glass that shimmered in the hazy air and, through the blur of myopia, seemed to crouch like great beasts.

Seized by panic, Dick kept on going, looking back over his shoulder, embarrassed and resentful. Sweat ran down his back and, when he reached the safety of his dark red Lexus, he peeled off his seersucker sports coat and folded it over the front seat. He slid behind the wheel, and the "new" smell of his luxury car restored his sense of power. He revved the engine loudly and peeled away from the curb, leaving Spire Square in the dust. Turning left down Spring, he drove past strip malls, gas stations, and fast food joints, ready to give up the whole project, his frustration fueled by the sight of a glaring yellow billboard with angry black letters that demanded to know "'What part of 'thou shalt not' didn't you understand?' --God." Some fundamentalist church's idea of drawing souls into the fold.

That did it.

He went home and changed into swimming trunks. He was going wind surfing.

This Sunday was Bliss's seventy-fifth birthday. Dick and Sharon and the children were invited for an early dinner; Sharon had offered to bring the

green bean casserole. A woman in Vieux Chien never got an invitation without being expected to bring a covered dish, and soon came to be known for the dish she could be counted on to bring, time and time again. Sharon's was the green bean casserole, the one with canned mushroom soup and those greasy onion crisps on top. Everyone was pretty sure this would be Bliss's last birthday, though they were careful not to say so in her presence. Why the secrecy, she couldn't imagine: she was obviously starving to death. Opal pushed her wheelchair into her customary niche by the windows in the sun room, so she could look out on her former garden. "There, now, Bliss, you can see the tulips," she said.

"Where?" she asked. She had to muster all her strength to make herself heard.

"Why, out there, in the grass. Look hard! Why, there must be a dozen of them over there, just beyond the tree."

Once there'd been scores of tulips--and narcissus and daffs and bearded iris as well. Did Opal think it gave her pleasure to see the weeds choking the beds? She used to work in the yard every day! The Garden Club spring luncheon was always held here in this very room, and after nibbling the sandwiches and tea, the ladies in their dresses trooped out back with spades to dig up a start of one plant or another. Bliss oversaw the work, but she was generous, dividing up her prize bulbs and perennials. She hadn't seen anyone from the Garden Club in years.

Now she sat in her niche, a relic, a household saint. For a Methodist, that's not a good feeling. All she lacked was a bank of votive candles and a collection box. Family members would come and go as their schedules permitted, stopping by for a moment or two during their busy days to update her on the latest happenings in their lives and, now that she couldn't

give it, to ask for advice. It was torture. She knew how God must feel, hearing the faulty logic and self-deception by which His children rationalized their plans--the elaborate schemes they contrived, then blamed Him for when things went wrong.

A handsome dark red car pulled into the drive and here came her son and family: Sharon and Dick, looking like there was trouble in paradise. Must have had words earlier. The children preceded them, coming in the back door right into the room where she sat, awkwardly approaching the hateful wheelchair. Dolly and Hunter leaned in and planted kisses on her flat, wooden cheeks; the little ones, bearing gifts, stopped three feet away.

As her back curled now into a question mark, Bliss could only raise her head so far. With difficulty she looked up at Dolly and said, "How's my Dolly, my own, my favorite grand baby?" but it came out as a long, lowing sound.

"Happy birthday, Grandma. How about some cards later?"

It must be two years since she'd been able to hold a deck in her hands.

I remember, too, sweetie. You had the touch. Got it from me.

Hunter waved, as though he couldn't speak, either. He'd always been skittish, ever since he'd come in and seen the new prosthetic leg leaning against the piano. He'd been little more than a baby then--just learning how to use his own legs. After that, she'd made sure always to be wearing it when the family was expected.

"Up here, Hannah! Sit on Granny's lap and give her a kiss," she said, but it sounded like a gurgle and Hannah jumped back. Wolfe actually went down on one knee as Sharon had instructed him to do in church, and Dolly hoisted him into her arms and said, "Let's go say hello to Grandpa, want to? We'll put the presents in the dining room. No peeking, Grandma!"

Sharon was wearing her dutiful smile and bearing her casserole as though it were her ticket of admission. "Green bean casserole," she said, as if Bliss needed to be told.

Always so nice, Sharon. "You're too nice," Bliss said.

Sharon looked confused.

"Don't try so hard," Bliss said.

Dicky bent down and Bliss caught a whiff of after shave. This was something new.

"It won't be as good as yours, Mom," he promised, meaning the casserole.

First with your sisters, and now your wife. When will you learn that being kind doesn't diminish you? She gestured with a curled hand next to her ear. "Looks good. I like it."

Dicky looked puzzled and Sharon said, "I think she means the sideburns. She approves. We tried to get him to shave them off for years, didn't we, Bliss? But he wouldn't listen to us. He only listens to his campaign committee."

They both looked tired.

Eddi and Tommi pulled in in their bakery van. They made several noisy trips to bring in all seven layers of an elaborate cake they'd baked and decorated, plus all the columns and the fountain they meant to use in its assembly. Tommi's daughter, Gloriana, age nine, made an entrance, wobbling in high-heeled shoes and carrying nothing but a rabbit fur muff.

As always, when they came, the house came alive, as if they were the whole party. Tommi was talking about bloody Marys before she'd even removed her coat. Bliss would have a bloody Mary today, yes please. Make

it strong.

Now that their hands were free, the twins proceeded to reassert dominance of the pack by teasing everyone, calling Dick "Baby Bro," and commenting about his widening bald spot.

Dick took it with good grace, then followed Sharon to the kitchen and proceeded to berate her green bean casserole.

While Tommi mixed the drinks, Eddi pushed Bliss's wheelchair into the dining room so she could watch her assemble the cake. Each layer had been decorated to depict the major events of Bliss's life, beginning with her girlhood, then her marriage to Delbert, and a separate layer for each baby. The twins each got their own layer. "We wouldn't both fit on one," Eddi explained.

From the kitchen, Tommi called, "Are you saying I'm fat? You're getting a double shot of Tabasco for that!"

Like a wedding cake, the layers got progressively smaller, as if to suggest that Bliss's life had gradually diminished in scope. The bottom layer was the biggest, of course, a great outdoors scene complete with a lake and a tiny sailboat.

"You can't see her, but Grandma's sailing the boat by herself," Eddi explained to Hannah. There was a tennis court, too: an icing blob directly on top of the net was Bliss, winning the match for V.C. High, senior year; and the eighteenth hole of a golf course with a tiny dot of white icing representing the putt she sank to win the ladies' championship for the city the summer before she met Delbert.

"Grandma's everywhere at once," Hannah observed, and everyone laughed because that's what they'd all said before she'd gotten sick. "The bride and groom look funny down there, instead of on top," she said,

pointing to the next layer from the bottom.

"It's symbolic," Aunt Eddi explained. "We've put marriage where it belongs. Oh, men have their place--our job is to keep them in it. Here. Help me, will you, Hannah?" She gave Hannah some of the plastic columns and showed her where to put them to separate the layers. "You're going to grow up to be my right-hand at the bakery, aren't you?" Sharon prickled at what she saw as a calculated effort to undermine her own influence on her daughter.

The second layer from the top depicted the garden--that's where the fountain would go. It was only after the family had gotten older that Bliss's hobby had become an obsession. With painstaking care, Eddi had tried to create different flower varieties with tiny dots and squiggles of icing.

Hannah pointed to a set of figures in the grass. "Is that some kind of writing?" she asked.

"That's you, silly--the grandchildren. I thought my hand would fall off by that point. Sharon, why did you have to have so many?" Eddi was childless.

"Four isn't so many," she said defensively.

"Don't pay any attention to her. We love you," Tommi said, coming in from the kitchen and handing her a Bloody Mary, but Sharon felt so patronized by the remark that it might have been a glass of milk.

The top layer was just big enough to depict the family seated around a miniature dining table that featured a replica of the birthday cake.

"It's just amazing--the detail! How did you ever do it?" Sharon murmured as envy and admiration and something like dismay washed over her. She'd often felt she had more in common with her mother-in-law than with the sisters, who were of her own generation. But she'd forgotten Bliss's

athletic achievements--and of course her garden. Her own life suddenly felt narrower than the icing dining table on Bliss's cake.

Tommi's daughter, Gloriana, made another entrance. Sharon saw the effect of her blue velvet and taffeta dress on Hannah, whose shoulders drooped now in her corduroy jumper. Opal and Gina, who were Bliss's companions, came in from the kitchen and fussed over Glori, especially the elaborate heart-shaped French braid her hair had been done up in. Grandpa Delbert came up behind her and squeezed her shoulders as she lit the candles and sparklers.

But when she went to release the lever that made the cake plate turn, Wolfe squirmed in between Glori and the table and cried, "Let me!" They struggled for the lever.

"Wolfe!" Tommi scolded, and it sounded like "Woof!" But Wolfe refused to budge and Sharon felt a ridiculous stab of satisfaction as his fingers moved the lever and the plate started to turn and play Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Undaunted, Glori turned around and around as though she, too, were on a pedestal, and led the singing--in German.

Her life might be narrower than the lives of her remarkable sisters-in-law, but at least she'd kept her marriage intact, and Sharon believed her secret was good sex. Twenty years of marriage never came without problems, but sex had never been one of them. If anything, lovemaking was the one constant in their relationship. During the last month of her pregnancy with Wolfe, they actually broke the bed. They had just enough time to heap the tangled blankets over their sweaty limbs before Hunter toddled in and asked why they were on the floor, at which they feigned great surprise.

Every year they celebrated their anniversary with a dinner at their favorite restaurant, forty minutes outside Vieux Chien, with the fitting name of Way Back When. Once, on the drive back home, Dick had pulled off the interstate and, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other inside Sharon's blouse, had searched frantically for a secluded spot where they made love like a couple of newlyweds. They couldn't wait until they were home and in bed. After that one time, the urgent sex became a regular part of the anniversary celebration. This past October they never made it to the restaurant at all. They skipped dinner and went right for the dessert. In his haste, Dick got them good and lost and they'd ended up in a small, desolate country graveyard with ancient, listing headstones. Dick drove all the way to the back, where there weren't any graves, but it made Sharon uneasy all the same. The whole time Dick was nibbling at her throat, she kept an eye peeled for a ghoul in a winding cloth to tear open the door and drag them out and exact some revenge for this desecration. Nothing happened, of course, and afterward, too rumped to be seen in any public dining room, they went through the drive-through at McDonald's.

In confession Sharon confided to Father Wirst that she sometimes worried that sex was not only the best thing in her marriage, but the only good thing.

Father Wirst was sympathetic, if perhaps too interested in hearing about Dick's sexual appetites. He assured her that sex was a gift from God.

"Yes, Father, but the Holy Father warned married couples against lusting after one another."

Father agreed that yes, he had.

"Well, I have really tried to concentrate in bed on just loving my husband, and love is an act of the will, isn't it, but sex is.... well, Father, it

doesn't work."

Father didn't know what to say to that, so he assured her that, in her situation, it was all right to take the birth control pill, rather than threaten the stability of her marriage and the welfare of her children, who might grow up in a broken home, which was the worst thing that could happen short of not being brought up in the church. "Be brave," Father told her. "Offer it up."

"Yes, I will."

"God loves a cheerful giver."

"Yes, Father."

"And feel free to discuss it with me further. Any time."

"Yes, Father."

On either side of the confessional grill, priest and sinner smiled.

Naturally, after Bliss's party, when she'd felt so deflated by her accomplished sisters-in-law, she needed the assurance of Dick's love—or lust, as the case may be. But she didn't feel particularly attractive now. At some point during the evening she'd noticed Dick looking at her with a strange expression, a sort of objectivity that was chilling. As if he were reevaluating her, or seeing her for the first time. She climbed into bed, half expecting him to turn away from her. But when he grabbed her with the usual gusto, she forgot her misgivings and did her penance as Father had prescribed, with abandon. As usually happened after a visit with his sisters, he wanted to be on top.

Afterward, she couldn't sleep, though he slept soundly. He was dreaming, murmuring in his sleep something about "sugar plum fairies." At one point, he let out a sort of strangled cry. She shook him awake, and he muttered, "Sorry.... Dreamed... three sisters..." Then he was out again, and

finally she fell asleep, too.

Around 4:00 a.m. they got a phone call from Eddi saying that Bliss had died. Opal, whose one fault was a drinking habit that sometimes caused her to sleep through Bliss's frequent calls for help getting to the bathroom, happened to be awake for once, "reading," she said--though Eddi found a wine glass and an empty bottle of a good pinot noir on the kitchen table--when she realized she hadn't heard a peep out of Bliss since putting her to bed around 9:15.

It was now 1:45. Normally, Bliss would have needed to use the bathroom at least twice by now; being afraid that she might not make it in time seemed to make her bladder work overtime. Opal went upstairs to check on her, riding up on the chair lift because, she said, she felt a little dizzy from "reading."

She found Bliss lying on her side under the blankets as she'd left her a few hours before, looking as peaceful as a lamb, but dead.

Dick hung up the phone. He didn't need to explain to Sharon what had happened; she'd heard enough. They looked at each other for a moment and then Dick looked away. She felt suddenly shy and a little afraid. Somehow she knew he didn't want to be touched. What if she reached out and he pushed her away? She'd gone to funerals and embraced total strangers, murmured words of sympathy knowing full well no words were adequate. This was her husband; she ought to know what to say to him and she didn't.

"I'm going over to the house to be with my family," he said, already pulling on his pants.

She felt a bit excluded, but of course he had to be with Delbert and his sisters; and someone had to stay here with the children.

During the few days before the funeral, she expressed her love in the only way she knew how, pretty certain for once that it was not lust. They were never able to discuss his grief; nor did he let it show once the funeral was over. They wanted each other more than ever, though. In the bathroom, the kitchen, even the basement tool room. She thought of it as thumbing their noses at death. Two weeks later, she missed her period.

Life had reaffirmed itself, damn it.

Marijayne Hoffman could have explained to Sharon the difference between lust and making love. She and Dane made love every Sunday evening, though to Dane it felt more like a ritual enacted in a manner that maximized good taste and efficiency, with lights out and a minimum of wrinkling of the floral bed ensemble. When the act was completed, Marijayne would jump up from the bed and disappear into the bathroom. While Dane smoothed the sheets and fluffed her pillow, she scrubbed and brushed until her skin was pink and her gums bled. They climbed back under the covers and Marijayne recorded the estimated number of calories burned, then hand in hand, they drifted into mostly untroubled sleep. Occasionally, Dane was bothered by a dream in which he was a wild stallion performing circus acts with a voluptuous bareback rider. He could feel the rhythm of her rising and falling, and the pressure of her long legs hugging his back; somehow he could see her heavy breasts moving, too, under the taut satin of her brief costume. She flicked her whip against his flank and whispered wild things into his ear. Snorting and steaming, he rode her hard around the track as the crowd cheered. The dream, so real, so intense, startled him awake, technically faithful to his wife, sleeping soundly and smelling of Ivory soap. Dane believed his marriage was solid because it was

based on something more than sex. On the Sunday evening of Bliss's death, in the stately house on Grand Boulevard, in their king-sized mahogany four-poster from the Heirloom Collection by Baker Furniture, which they've been paying off for almost two years, Dane Hoffman collapsed in Marijayne's arms with a groan, knocking the breath right out of her. Astonished, she managed to push him away and, tucking the sheet under her arms, sat up and turned on the light. "What is it?" she asked.

He hung his head and said, miserably, "Sweetie's dead--the Murrays' dog. She died on the operating table Friday. It was a simple tummy tuck. I didn't want to perform the surgery in the first place--it was unnecessary, purely for looks, but Bev insisted. And then her heart just ... stopped. It wasn't my fault!" He was rehearsing what he would say to Bev Murray tomorrow morning when she came to pick up her little dog.

"Are you telling me that Bev wasn't at the clinic the whole time, waiting to talk to you after the surgery?"

"Oh, she was there, all right."

"And--?"

"I told her Sweetie pulled through like a little trooper."

"What?" Marijayne leaped on top of the covers on all fours, her mouth pulled back in horror. If she were a German shepherd, her ears would be standing straight up. Dane patted her shoulder reassuringly. "It's all right. I'll tell them first thing in the morning. I'll say Sweetie had post-operative complications."

"Where is she now?" Marijayne glanced around the room, as if the little dog might be on the dresser, paws up.

"In the freezer at the clinic. Don't worry. She'll keep."

Marijayne nodded slowly. "Yes, it'll be all right. The Murrays will

understand." She seemed to be trying to reassure herself more than Dane, and he wondered how it was that she had nothing more to say about these poor people, who had lost a pet that they loved like their own child. He didn't mention how later, after the staff had left, he'd gone back in and removed the heart to examine it and found a congenital defect that certainly might have shortened Sweetie's life. At first he'd been elated--until he asked himself why he hadn't known about the defect to begin with? He'd done rather a botch of dissecting and would need steady fingers to piece the heart back together before he could replace it in the chest cavity. He was too upset to do it then. Hopefully he could delay returning the body to the Murrays Monday when, calmer for having broken the news, he might have the presence of mind and steady hands to do the job. He lay awake long after Marijayne had begun snoring softly beside him, going back over the operation, trying to figure out what had gone wrong with his luck.

Dane made his own luck, but when things went well, he gave Marijayne the credit. After they'd met in college, he'd brought his grades up, avoided the draft, graduated with honors, got accepted into veterinary school--and he'd done it all to please her. Not that she ever was pleased, not entirely. For every hurdle he cleared, there was always another. As a handler, Bev Murray had nothing on Marijayne. She put him through his paces, and knew how to make him want to please her by achieving ever more challenging feats.

He'd first met her at the coffee shop near the veterinary school, where he'd stopped for a quick bite between classes. As he approached the counter, he noticed her hair, as silky and wavy as a spaniel's, and about the right color. With great restraint he'd refrained from reaching out and stroking it. Then the head turned toward him, tossing that gorgeous hair, and he found

himself staring into eyes even more remarkable than the hair. They were deep brown and fathomless, and their expression was as trusting as a St. Bernard's. They promised that their possessor was capable of great loyalty. Without realizing he was speaking aloud, he murmured, "Fido!" It escaped from his lips like a recognition of the sacred.

She did not understand. Her mouth dropped open as though he'd insulted her.

"It's Latin for 'I am faithful,'" he stammered.

"It's a name for a dog is what it is," she cried, indignant and hurt, and she gathered her books and stepped down from the stool, bending to whisper to the girl on the stool next to her, whose lank hair hung beside her ears like Farfel's, the dog in the Nestle's Quik commercials. This girl glanced at Dane's lab coat and whispered something back, before both girls carried their coffee mugs over to a booth on the far side of the coffee shop.

He'd sat down at the counter and ordered coffee. When the waitress brought a steaming mug, he stared into it and the brown liquid seemed the very essence of those peerless eyes. The sight of his own eyes reflected in the coffee startled him. When he opened a book and tried to study, he saw her eyes on the page like the impression a camera flash leaves on the retina. He sought her out, with great difficulty he won her. "Fido" became his mantra, and faithful he was. He amazed himself with what he was able to accomplish for her. In only one thing had he refused to give in: he would not change his program of study to what she termed "real" medicine. He'd only ever wanted to be a doctor of veterinary medicine, and a doctor of veterinary medicine he would be.

Now, when he finally dozed off, Dane dreamed he was stumbling through the stand of trees behind the clinic. He had a waist-long beard and

was naked except for a tattered t-shirt. Behind him someone started up a car. The crunching of tree limbs told him that the car was coming after him. Over the crunching of tree limbs he heard a mournful howl. He ran for the safety of the clinic, but the clinic was sealed in a clear plastic ball, the kind he used to keep his pet hamster in. The ball rolled away, the clinic faded, then disappeared. He could see Marijayne's brown eyes rolling like loose marbles inside.

Marijayne was not given to despondent moods or to brooding. Her disposition was naturally cheerful and in childhood her adoring father, a minister, had quite convinced his little daughter that God loved her fully as much as he did. She was an adult before she found out that certain oft-quoted sayings of her father's were actually Biblical promises made to humankind in general and not directed solely to her. But by then the expectation of plenty and abundance was so ingrained that she could easily share Providence with others and feel no lessening of her own blessings. Soothed by Dane's reassurances, she had slept soundly and awoke Monday morning as cheerful as ever. To her surprise, Dane appeared wan and nervous. Lines creased his face, his eyes looked dim and sunken--he seemed to have aged ten years overnight! He needed to be pried out of bed and had to be told a dozen times or more that "Things will work out for the best--they always do!" By the time he finally left the house, taking the girls with him to drop them off at school, she had exhausted herself. A glance in the mirror reassured her: another good hair day. But while performing her usual quick clean-up of the bathroom, she realized too late that Dane had left the faucet in the "shower" position--and her hair got soaked. She got a late start in to work and her parking space was taken. She tripped on something

on the sidewalk and dropped the coffeecake she'd picked up as a peace offering for the boss. He needed her to go right away and pick up some ads from the Mall Merchant Association, and of course she got stuck by a freight train. She counted a hundred thirty-eight cars before the train rolled to a stop and began backing up.

Marijayne was having a bad morning. How could this be?

If Dane hadn't needed so much nurturing this morning, none of this would have happened. He was so needy. Marijayne was tired of having always to cheer him along, of having to be strong for them both.

Marijayne found herself brooding, and there was no stopping it once it had started. All the clichés currently making the rounds of talk shows played in her head like tracks of a CD. Snatches from Oprah and Sally, bits from conversations with Debbie Upton, her best friend. She was an enabler, that's what she was. She was codependent. Men and women spoke different languages--there were a million problems with her marriage. Why hadn't she noticed them before?

She almost wished she'd let Stephanie have the chance she'd wanted with Dane.

Freshman year of college, her roommate obsessed over the prospect of ending up an old maid, a notion she got from magazines like *Cosmo* and *Mademoiselle*, the texts she read while Marijayne puzzled over her math homework, the texts she said really mattered. Month after month feature articles warned of a serious shortage of potential mates for the girls of the baby boom generation. Between bites of a Clark Bar from the vending machines on the fourteenth floor which she washed down with Diet Pepsi, Stephanie read that a record crop of young women was ripening on the vine, but as fields of young American men were being mown down in a war in a

small country in Southeast Asia, who would do the picking? The harvest was great but the laborers were few. When she wasn't reading magazines, Stephanie watched soap operas, feeding her hunger with popcorn consumed by the handful and more Diet Pepsi. She mooned over love scenes she was convinced she would never experience firsthand.

Sometimes she went to class—often enough that she managed to pull a 3.0 fall quarter. Winter quarter she was back, taking a more rigorous bunch of classes. One day in the middle of February, she came back from her economics class breathless with excitement.

"There's no shortage of men on this campus. There must be twenty guys in my econ class, and some of them come in all the time wearing fatigue jackets. They're vets! Marijayne, they're not all getting killed in Viet Nam!"

Marijayne had blinked at her in astonishment. "You mean you've just noticed? What about all the boys who hang out on the bridge and stare at the girls coming back from classes? Or the ones down in the lobby waiting for the elevators to the men's floors?"

Between the draft dodgers who counted on a student deferment and the returning vets on the G.I. Bill, college was the place to meet men during the Viet Nam war. The question then became why weren't they getting asked out? Stephanie suggested they make themselves available by hanging out in likelier spots.

Marijayne didn't share her roommate's obsession and was in no hurry to get married. But she was willing to keep her company, if it made her feel better.

"You don't mean bars, do you?" Marijayne wondered. "I won't do that."

Stephanie gave her a look. "I do not mean to meet the father of my

children in a campus bar. I mean we hang out near the law school and the medical school--places where we're likely to meet the kind of men we're interested in."

Marijayne knew that Stephanie didn't mean they should switch majors. Girls who aspired to be doctors and lawyers had a y chromosome somewhere.

Stephanie confessed that she'd already scoped it out and found a coffee shop located between the law school and the medical college. "We go in for coffee and see what happens," she said.

As luck would have it--and Marijayne was used to good luck--they encountered Dane the very first time. He was good-looking and his lab coat suggested that he must be a med student. But he'd made a mistake with the "Fido" thing.

"He didn't mean it that way." Stephanie had so warmly defended him that Marijayne dug in her heels and told her, "He's not my type. If you're interested, he's all yours. Help yourself." As if it were as easy as that.

Of course, the more she resisted, the more he pursued, to poor Stephanie's mortification. She just couldn't hold a candle to Marijayne--they both knew it.

And then, all of a sudden, Dane seemed to be changing his mind. Marijayne went over to the coffee shop by herself one day--and found Stephanie and Dane sitting beside each other in a booth, so absorbed in conversation they didn't notice her at first. Something in her welled up and asserted itself, some customary sense of entitlement that made her take what she could get, whether she wanted it or not.

It was only later that she found out he was a student of veterinary medicine and not a future cardiologist. She couldn't pull out of the

relationship now. For one thing, Dane was handsome and sweet—how could she not love him? Stephanie had started dating an elementary education major, a returning vet.

“Imagine a soldier who wants to teach little children,” she said. “Isn’t that sweet?”

Marijayne figured that Stephanie must be deeply in love to sacrifice her dreams of marrying a doctor or a lawyer in order to marry a teacher. But really, all that business about meeting a man with a future had been Stephanie’s idea in the first place. The times were against her, too. Anti-war demonstrations and student sit-ins on campus made Dane more determined than ever to accomplish his goals. He stepped around student picket lines to go to classes, ignoring the signs and oblivious to the jibes of the protesters. Grudgingly, she came to admire his determination.

But it was his Latin that finished her. Whenever he used it, she sat up like a drowsing pet that hears the rustle of the feed bag. She’d beg for it. “Talk Latin to me!” and he’d murmur every Latin word he could think of: anatomical terms, diseases, pharmacology, making his voice urgent and seductive.

They became engaged just before the Kent State shootings that closed down universities across the country. The National Guard was on campus in anticipation of student demonstrations, but she made Dane buy her a ring and take her out to dinner and propose properly. On the way back to the dorm, they stopped to kiss, pressing their lips together like the lovers in a grainy, black-and-white Hollywood film, and Marijayne leaned into him, lifting one foot behind her as she’d seen it done in the movies. Then all at once they were swept up into a surge of students advancing on the Guardsmen and caught in a rain of tear gas. Marijayne was lifted up and

tossed about, handed around like a log, sneezing violently from the tear gas. It was like being in a mosh pit years before there was such a thing. Dane had to wade through the crowd and wrestle her away from a look-alike, then carry her, fireman-style, out of the mob and back to his apartment. The guardsmen wouldn't let them back to the dorm.

Thinking that Sweetie was recovering nicely from surgery, the Murrays had gone out of town for the weekend. They rarely got away without their Sweetie, for Beverly refused to leave her with a sitter. They'd left her once at a place billed as a luxury hotel for pets, where she had her own room with a spectacular view of a lake that she could enjoy from a cushion on a deep window seat that caught the morning sun. But she was too homesick and refused to take her gourmet meals in the guest dining room, and only picked at the T-bone when room service brought it to her suite. She'd lost two pounds that week and, for the first time, came home from the next show without a ribbon. Beverly promised her that she'd never, ever again leave her Sweetie in the care of strangers.

First thing Monday morning the Murrays arrived at the clinic to collect their pet, eager to remove her from the company of lesser breeds. Last time she'd been kept overnight, Beverly swore she'd begun drooping her ears like the beagle in the adjoining kennel. As all artists, Sweetie was susceptible to influence. Beverly came in carrying a box of bakery treats that Lorraine eyed with interest, forgetting for the moment the terrible news that awaited these people.

"Cream puffs," Beverly explained.

"Ooh, my downfall! Mind if I take a peek?" Lorraine cracked open the box and peered inside at two golden clouds of puff pastry drizzled with

what looked like a chocolate glaze. "Whipped cream or custard filling?" she asked.

Ray Murray laughed, reading her mind. "Pork rind farce, Sweetie's favorite. We got them at this place on the Miracle Mile. We had to bring her a little something back from our trip."

"Where is she?" Bev Murray held her arms out and watched for the little dog to trot through the doorway leading to the kennels.

Lorraine's face fell and she let go of the pastry box with a small cry.

Beverly Murray, guessing the truth, fainted dead away. Her husband caught her before she hit her head on the corner of the reception desk and collected her in his arms. Staggering under the weight, he followed Lorraine to Dane's private office and draped her over an armchair.

"I'll go and find Dr. Hoffman," Lorraine murmured and made a hasty retreat down the hall. Moments later, Dane entered, his face a mask of misery.

Couples rarely respond to grief in the same way. As his wife slowly regained consciousness and began to moan, Ray Murray grew furious. "You told us on Friday that she was all right," he blustered.

Dane thrust both hands into the pockets of his lab coat, took a deep breath, and opened his mouth to explain.

Now, Dane was a man of great compassion, but the capacity of his heart far exceeded his powers of speech, and thus he was given to somewhat eccentric mannerisms. When he first started dating Marijayne, for instance, he used to kiss her with his eyes open, as she discovered once when she opened hers too soon and met two enormous, staring lunar eclipses. He soon learned to keep both eyes shut, except when it was necessary to close one, as, for example, when winking. And he winked a lot. The habit started

the time Marijayne informed him, when he arrived late for a date, that he smelled like a barnyard. He knew he did; in his impatience to see her, he hadn't taken the time to go back to the apartment and shower first. But her comment stung. To cover his embarrassment, he winked. After that, every time she hurt him, every time they argued, every time he was at a loss for words, he winked. It became an integral part of his vocabulary, as versatile as *n'est-ce pas*. He winked to convey tone, emphasis, subtleties of meaning. Twenty-nine years later, he still winked--at everyone. People who first met him thought it a charming gesture, but soon came to wonder whether he had a nervous tic. Some of the clients at the clinic had trouble knowing when to take him seriously.

One time he asked Vera Kruse whether or not she was in the habit of brushing Fluffy's teeth. He appeared serious, but when he followed the remark with a wink, Vera tittered at what she guessed was a joke. But no.

"Allow me recommend a toothbrush," he said, to her surprise. He left the examining room and returned with what looked like a small radiator brush, with a handle eight inches long and a row of straight bristles. He held it out with a smile--and again winked.

Vera thought he must be joking now, and laughed as if he were holding up a rubber chicken.

"Oh, I forgot the tooth paste. Just a sec--." Again Dane ducked out and again returned, now with a tube that looked ridiculously small beside the toothbrush. "I'm afraid I'm all out of the tuna-flavor. I hope Fluffy likes chicken." This time he chuckled--and winked.

Vera held one hand over her mouth and the other to her side. "Please stop!" she begged, laughing now hysterically.

Laughter was good, because the next stop was the cashier. Feline

dental hygiene doesn't come cheap. The sign over Lorraine's desk, "Payment is due at time of service," was her idea, and she meant it. Lorraine did not laugh when someone asked if they could send in a check. And there was no way to avoid passing the reception desk on the way out. (Lorraine, by the way, thought Dane winked at her because he found her attractive. The fact that he never acted on his obvious attraction only showed that he was a man of integrity, who honored his marriage vows--and that made him all the more attractive to Lorraine.)

Dane, standing now before the Murrays, his lungs full of air and his mouth open to explain, let out the air in one breath and, holding his empty hands out to convey his helplessness, winked. While he meant to convey the utter futility of words to express his deep remorse and his complete oneness with them in grief, the Murrays did not understand.

Beverly gasped at what appeared to be his indifference and fainted again. This time her husband didn't catch her, and her head hit the metal table, which reverberated like a cymbal at the moment of crisis in a Tchaikovsky symphony. In perfect rhythm, Ray Murray pulled his right arm back, balled his fist, and swung. He intended to put out the offending eye, but missed, and knocked over a tray of instruments that clattered loudly on the slate tile floor. He swung again, and Dane, unflinching, took the punch squarely in the nose.

He felt and heard his nose break as easily as a wishbone, then let the blood flow freely as he squatted to attend to Mrs. Murray. A bump like a goose egg was already forming on the back of the left side of her head, and Dane called out for Lorraine to bring in an ice pack. He saw now that Beverly was wearing a sweater that matched the one they'd brought Sweetie in with, and this hit him with such force that for a moment he thought that Ray had

punched him again, this time in the stomach. He was careful not to let the blood from his nose drip onto that sweater.

"Where is she?" Ray demanded. "We want to take her home with us."

"I'll go see about that," he croaked. Lorraine had brought in the ice pack--or rather, had stood in the doorway long enough to toss it to Dane, who now handed it to Ray and told him to apply it to his wife's head.

Something in Ray Murray's voice made him nervous. He was pretty sure they weren't going to take the dog home and bury it behind the garage, not right away. In his agitation, he imagined all kinds of possibilities. He thought they might take the carcass immediately to the prosecutor's office and have him arrested before closing time. He imagined the clinic boarded up, himself behind bars, Marijayne and the girls hungry, his parents dropping dead from shock. But these images paled beside the scene he'd just witnessed, and his compassion for the Murrays.

It was far worse than he'd imagined all weekend.

In one split second, he'd made a bad decision, and a moment it was too late. The Murrays had left the clinic and left town and he had had no way of contacting them and admitting the truth: Sweetie was dead. He wasn't responsible for that--for the death, but he was guilty of a single bad judgment. Whatever the consequences, he must face them, and he would. The image from his dream came back to him, Marijayne's brown eyes rolling away from him like marbles in a glass ball.

He could leave it up to Lorraine to bring them the dog's body, to take the brunt of their anger--they wouldn't be as harsh with her, to usher them out of the clinic with all the right apologies and reassurances. But that would be cowardly. He felt he owed it to Sweetie to do this right. He went to the

back where the carcass was being held and reverently readied it to turn over to the Murrays, for burial, or whatever would come next.

After the Murrays left, Dane returned to his office and calmly removed his lab coat and hung it on the hook behind the door. He ripped off the name tag from the left lapel, "Dane Hoffman, D.V.M." and threw it in the waste can. He started to pull off his wedding band, too, twisting until it hurt, to get it over the knuckle.

No. The Murrays, the veterinary board, the courts could have everything else, but not that. His nose didn't hurt as much as he might have expected, and the bleeding had stopped. The nose was the least of his worries, though. He sat on the floor with his back against the closed door, playing over and over in his mind the events of the morning, listening for the telephone, for sirens, for something cataclysmic to happen. But there was only Lorraine's quiet knock, sometime later, and her worried voice.

"Are you all right? Dr. Hoffman? Do you want me to drive you to the emergency room and have them look at your nose? Dr. Hoffman? I brought you an ice pack."

He didn't answer and she went away. Sometime later, she was back. "Dr. Hoffman? What should I tell the patients?"

The thought of the animals and people who depended on him, brought him out of himself. Slowly he collected himself, collected his instruments, then with a forced cheerfulness, he popped his head around the door and gave Lorraine a thumbs up. "I'm ready for the next patient," he boomed, wondering how long he could keep up the pretense.

She sucked in her breath at the sight of his nose, but turned and pattered down the hall in her high heels to call in Mrs. Graham with her Siamese cats.

Work brought temporary relief anxiety. If anything, Dane was more careful than ever before--and he'd always been thorough in making a diagnosis. Now he took more time with his patients, stroking a nervous cat until it lay down, purring, on the cold metal examining table. He surprised the owner of a border collie by sitting down and lifting the animal onto his lap, then burying his chin into its thick fur and crooning a lullaby. When the animal fell limp against his shoulder, he pulled out his stethoscope and proceeded to check its heart and lungs, glancing up at the astonished owner--but not winking.

But when it came time to make an actual diagnosis, he hemmed and hawed and said, "I'll call you in the morning," or referred the patient to another vet "for a second opinion."

"But Dr. Hoffman, it's just ear mites--"

"Ear mites or possibly a severe middle ear infection. I want you to see a specialist to be absolutely sure."

"I can't afford--"

Dane held up a hand and shook his head. "I won't bill you for today's appointment. I'll have Lorraine phone and set up an appointment for you with Dr. Hoozhyt. Do you know where his office is?"

"Sure. Thank you, Doctor!"

"Thanks, Dane."

"Hey, thanks a lot, man."

He didn't go to the emergency room to have his nose looked at until after closing time. He told the doctor he'd fallen, even though he knew the clean sideways angle of the break belied a swift right-handed punch delivered from a slightly upward swing. He could see that the doctor wasn't fooled, but he didn't press for the truth.

And neither did Marijayne, who easily bought his story of having tripped and fallen on the cement walk outside the clinic. She had apparently forgotten about Sweetie and the Murrays, because she didn't ask, and Dane didn't mention the scene in the clinic, much less his misgivings that the Murrays might seek retribution beyond what he'd already offered.

Marijayne wasn't thinking of Sweetie or of lawsuits the following morning, either, when the Rev. Damschroder surprised her by telephoning her at work. She had her hands full with the spring bridal section that was coming out Sunday.

The phone had been ringing off the hook all morning, and it was interfering with her getting any work done. So there was an edge to her usually musical delivery, when she answered the phone with, "*Evening Howl*, classified! Marijayne Hoffman speaking. How may I help?" Her co-workers teased her that no one else managed to get four syllables out of "howl," but for once she got it down to one.

"Hello, Marijayne, this is Ronald Damschroder. Your minister at Second First Methodist Church."

"Oh, yes, Reverend. You caught me off-guard, calling me at work." She went on to explain how busy they were. "...Our advertisers are calling in, changing the size of their ads, or giving us the names of the models they should have supplied the photographers with the day of the shoot, and with Vera in the hospital and all--."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her to relax, that he hadn't called her to chair the spaghetti supper. But he only explained about the membership campaign and the brochure, and then congratulated her that her family had been selected to be photographed for the cover. "But if you're

busy, I'm sure I can get someone else," he couldn't resist adding.

Not surprisingly, she was willing to accommodate his schedule, and even suggested a "perfect spot" to have the photo taken. "There's a beautiful old magnolia tree outside the clinic, a late bloomer, you might say--and it's ready to blossom any day. We could stand in front of that, and maybe get the sign in, too..."

He praised her for wishing to help her husband's business in this way, but suggested that the church might be a more appropriate setting for the photo for the membership brochure. Then he cleared his throat and turned to the matter of dress. "You know, Marijayne, when you mentioned the magnolia tree, you anticipated the theme I had in mind. I was thinking along the lines of 'the vine and the branches,' 'Your wife shall be as a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home'--that sort of thing. What about those dresses I saw you and the girls in last Sunday, the ones with the flowers? From the pulpit, you appeared as--four perfect, pink magnolia blossoms. And Dane in his gray suit was the trunk of the tree. What do you think?"

"I love it!" Marijayne cried, certainly flattered, not to mention surprised by the minister's display of a latent poetic sensibility, or maybe a marketing sense. So although she might have welcomed an excuse to shop for new outfits for her girls--and herself, of course--she allowed her aesthetic sense to revel in the mental picture of the final product. Her only questions were where and when--and could they order extra copies and poses?

The Reverend mentioned a date the following week, and Marijayne said "Yes," then, suddenly remembering Dane's nose, "No!" The splint wouldn't come off until the following week.

The following week would be fine with the Reverend Damschroder.

They each hung up their receivers and rubbed their hands in

anticipation.

The Hoffmans arrived at the church, Dane looking very “branchy” in his gray flannel suit and each girl a veritable cluster of blossoms. At close range, the impact of four identical, very pink, flowered dresses was considerable, especially with the accompanying blast of Shalimar that emanated from all four females. The Reverend Damschroder believed that nerve gas must produce similar effects: lightheadedness and knock-knees. His voice shook as he murmured that he’d just go and take a seat and let the photographer direct the proceedings.

The Hoffmans were filed into the front pew and their arms and heads positioned and nudged as if they were mannequins.

“Perfect!” the photographer said, “Beautiful!”

“Yes!” the photographer said, “That’s it!”

“Make love to the camera,” he urged, then glanced over at the Reverend Damschroder and murmured, “Sorry, Reverend.”

Marijayne knew how photographers worked, but couldn’t help but respond to his flattery. “You ever modeled, Ma’am?” he asked and she felt the spaces between her vertebrae expand.

Dane chuckled. “Take it easy--I have to live with her,” he joked.

The photographer seemed to think he was feeling neglected, for now he lavished attention on Dane. “Just keep doing what you’re doing, you’re perfect. Strong,” he said.

The Reverend Damschroder could hardly suppress his glee. The girls preening on either side of the sturdy central figure of the father seemed to toss and shiver like actual blossoms, unfurling their blossoms. They bloomed!

"All right, everyone! Ready? Don't look at the camera, look at the sanctuary. Don't smile. Well, yes, smile. Ma'am, close your mouth, just a little. You're Methodists, remember. Leave the ecstasies to the Pentecostals. That's better. Perfect!"

He snapped half a dozen frames rapid-fire, then moved about the sanctuary, shooting from several other angles. Nice-looking family. The girls: little beauties, every one. Had their mother's eyes, beautiful eyes. Only in the girls the expression was different--warmer, maybe. Yes, that was it. For all her good looks, there was something in the mother's expression that left him cold.

Dane's remarkable self-possession during the photo session and in the weeks following Sweetie's demise was paradoxical, for it was achieved by separating himself into two. If Dane were the trunk of the magnolia tree, as the Reverend Damschroder had put it, then he was a split trunk exposed to uneven growth conditions. The husband and father took in full sunlight and flourished, the roots gorged on nourishment from rich soil, while the doctor of veterinary medicine, compromised by growing in the shade in poor soil, had suffered the further insult of a harsh winter, and now some branches were bare of leaves. A bit of judicious pruning would save the tree, but for now the damage went undetected. He went about his life as before, and with each passing day that brought no reprisal from the Murrays, he recovered a little more of his former confidence. Each time his mind began to play the Sweetie track, he pushed the "skip" button. So successful was he at avoidance that, when a bondsman arrived at the clinic and served him with papers almost a month later, he was taken by surprise, as if there was some mistake, that these papers must be meant for some other veterinarian with

the same name.

He brought home the legal papers and tossed them on the counter with the junk mail, mentioning them in the most casual way, that Marijayne didn't know what to think. She was rolling chicken breasts around thin slices of ham and blocks of cheese for Chicken Cordon Bleu, but she stopped work to wash her hands and read the papers. Her eyes kept going back to the heavy black letters that spelled out "Subpoena."

"But you told me that Sweetie's death wasn't your fault."

"It wasn't."

"So then why are the Murrays suing you?"

"It's their Constitutional right. Oh, and there's to be a hearing before the veterinary board, too. Come on, Marijayne, don't look so worried. Remember the parakeet with the broken leg I had to amputate? The court threw out the complaint. The worst that can happen is I'll lose my license. You never wanted me to be a veterinarian in the first place. How would you like to be married to...an insurance salesman? That's it--I'll sell medical malpractice insurance!" He laughed at his own joke, grabbed a handful of smoked almonds from a glass jar next to the telephone and, whistling, went upstairs to change.

Marijayne bit her lip. He seemed so confident. Maybe there really was nothing to worry about. Or maybe there was, and he'd just gone a little insane.

She turned off the heat under the pan of burned melted butter and followed him to the landing of the wide staircase with its gleaming cherry railing and called up to him, "Shouldn't we get a lawyer?"

He either didn't hear her, though she could still hear him whistling. Perhaps he was ignoring her. Panic seized her as it had the time she'd met

her parents at O'Hare during a blizzard for a connecting flight to San Francisco for Tommy's wedding. Flight after flight was first delayed, then canceled, while more and more passengers poured in and swarmed around the harried agents. She'd stood at the gate waiting for her parents' flight. Laura was with her, not quite a year old, and she struggled to manage with the overstuffed diaper bag, the fold-up stroller, and the overtired baby who thrashed about in her misery--the whole while being jostled by strangers. When she first caught sight of her father, she'd felt an overwhelming relief. He would handle this, she thought. But gradually she'd become aware of his own confusion, his misunderstanding of what the agent was saying. Her heart fell, a hole opened up before her as she realized, My father is an old man! She would have to take over.

And she'd have to take over now. She got out the phone book and flipped through the yellow pages of attorney listings. How was anyone supposed to make sense out of the information given? She would have to go on her own instincts, and these, of course, were related to advertising. A full-page ad could mean a firm with a lot of money--or else one desperate for work. A local firm might not have the experience. Wouldn't a lawyer who was any good be drawn to a major city? Her eye fell on a full-page ad for a Detroit firm that listed twenty-seven lawyers. De la Renta and De la Renta. Glamorous Italians, maybe with Mafia connections.

But Dane, coming back into the kitchen, seemed surprised. "How could you think I'd see anyone but Dick Hedstrom?"

The Hedstroms have been next-door neighbors of his parents for years. When Dane's mother wasn't available for babysitting, Sharon sometimes helped out on an informal basis--that is, without pay. The girls practically lived at Grandma's, and Beatrice and Hannah Hedstrom played

together most afternoons after school and swam for the YMCA.

"He gave us all those zucchinis last year from his garden. And Sharon brings Teddy to the clinic. I intend to give him my business."

She flipped through the phone book to the small and unimpressive ad for Withers, Hedstrom and Hedstrom with its poor-quality photo--had they used a Polaroid? But when she was unable to talk him out of it, she called the office and got Dick on the line just as he was getting ready to go home for the day.

Perhaps he was responding to the lack of enthusiasm in her voice, for at first Hedstrom turned her down. "I do personal injury, not malpractice. I represent the patient, not the doctor," he explained.

"But Dane's not a real doctor, Dick," she argued. "He's a vet." She never dreamed she'd say that in his defense.

Finally Dick agreed to meet with Dane. "Why don't you have him stop over at the house tonight, say around seven-thirty? The lettuce has done well this year. I'll give him a few heads of oak leaf and bibb."

Marijayne rolled her eyes at Dane, who had no idea what it meant. "I don't think he can make it tonight. How about tomorrow--at your office?"

They agreed on a time and Marijayne hung up, shaking her head. "I hope we've made the right decision," she said.

She insisted on coming along to the appointment. Having decided that Dane couldn't be trusted to deal with matters on his own, she felt herself rising to new levels of competence--and liking it. She prepared like a warrior queen arming for battle, paying special attention to her grooming. Dane walked in on her as she soaked in the tub with a mud mask smeared on her face, cucumber slices pressed over each eyelid, and her feet splayed on either

side of the faucets, each toe separated by cotton balls as the polish dried. Her hands, too, were out of the water, the fingers spread on the edges of the tub, the nails perfectly lacquered in a red so deep it was almost purple.

"Just like Sweetie," he told her. "Bev Murray spent hours getting her ready for a show."

Marijayne ignored him. She was going over what she planned to say when they met with Dick Hedstrom. She would be all business. He would know that he was dealing with an astute woman.

She put on her gray flannel suit, but softened the crisp lines with a creamy georgette blouse, leaving open the top three buttons to allow a glimpse of her little bit of cleavage. She sprayed the Shalimar there, a final touch, like whipped cream on a sundae.

In the car, she drilled Dane. "Let him know he's being interviewed, not consulted, that if he doesn't pass muster, we'll take our business elsewhere."

They left the car with the parking attendant and, aware of heads turning to admire them, made their way with confident strides towards the building, Vieux Chien's only skyscraper, boasting thirteen stories. Arm in arm they strolled into the offices of Withers, Hedstrom, and Hedstrom.

Elaine directed them to Dick's office, then came back and gave Margaret a meaningful look. It's a sad business, but it's kind of funny, too. Hiding a dead dog like that. They couldn't resist making jokes.

"Did you see how thin she is?" Elaine whispered.

Margaret nodded. "Sleek as a greyhound. I'm surprised he doesn't keep her on a leash. She looks like the type that might run."

"But she's got him trained. He trotted at her heels like a cocker."

"I did notice his tail wagging, but he strikes me as having too much dignity for a spaniel."

"Then maybe he's a 'great' Dane."

They laughed silently, until the tears leaked from Margaret's blue eyes.

Dick Hedstrom was just the man to handle Dane's case: a Unitarian in a town of mainstream Christians, a Democrat in a Republican stronghold, the driver of a Honda in a town where the Ford plant is a major employer. Dick, like his Uncle Todd, a dentist who wrote frequent letters to the editor of *The Evening Howl* calling for a shutdown of the bubble gum plant, liked the challenge of an unpopular position, a lost cause.

Maybe he liked to champion the underdog because he was one himself: the curly-haired baby brother of twin sisters, Eddie and Tommie, whose colorless hair stuck straight out of their scalps like twigs. When Bliss carried their baby brother into the house, the girls stared through lashless gray eyes at his thick curls and his fate was sealed. Later, they carried him into the basement and hid him under the workbench. To mitigate the obvious resentment, Bliss signed her girls up for dance lessons at Miss Nancy's School of Dance. Every Tuesday afternoon, she led her girls down the street, pushing baby Dicky in his fringed stroller propped on cushions like the Dalai Lama, while her girls dawdled behind like little mud hens. The dance lessons were a huge success. The girls developed coordination and confidence and learned to play nicely with their baby bother. He made a fine nutcracker when they rehearsed in the living room for the holiday recital. Round and round they twirled, ever faster, holding him none too gently. They pirouetted and pliéd till Dicky threw up. Then they laid him on the floor and practiced grand jetés over him. When he was older, they coerced him into dancing mouse prince to their sugar plum fairy--and they were both sugar plum fairies. When he grew old enough to retaliate by tripping

them, they'd run to Bliss, crying, and she'd reprove them all for not getting along.

"Now, children, we don't hurt one another."

"Why not, Mama?" Eddie, the elder twin by five minutes would ask.

"Because we love each other," Bliss would insist.

Bliss refused to acknowledge the children's mutual dislike, thinking she could smother it as easily as a small cooking fire, but it continued to smolder, only underground now. Unable to name, much less admit his feelings, Dicky grew up thinking that love was that feeling you had when you thrust out your leg just as your leaping sibling cleared your tender belly and you watched her fall on her head. He learned to express his love for his wife in the same way. Whenever he felt she was getting too confident, too full of herself, he'd level her with a precisely timed comment. It was for her own good.

As you might expect, Dick grew up to become masculine with a vengeance. While his parents would have preferred him to take a degree and then to polish his education with a sort of scaled-down grand tour, "polish" was not what he desired for himself, but "roughing up." He chose instead to learn the brutal arts of war, drinking, and womanizing. While his contemporaries avoided the armed forces, Dick enlisted in the Army and eventually volunteered for Viet Nam. There, when asked by his fellow GI's how he managed to sleep through mortar attacks, he said it was because he'd learned guerrilla warfare at home. He had several close calls in the Army, some of them in skirmishes with the enemy, but miraculously he never suffered more than a concussion from hitting his head once when he passed out at a bar while on R&R in Taipei. It was almost as though Someone were watching out for him, though Dick was not a religious man and considered

himself merely lucky. After his discharge at Fort Campbell, he drove North in a new souped-up Chevy Impala, the country music blaring through the open windows.

"Hey, Ma!" he cried, and "Hey, Daddy!"

His parents wondered at his drawl, and after drying the joyful tears from their eyes, they marveled at his manly military bearing.

He carried in his duffel bag and a case of Bud, and proceeded to polish off a six-pack before dinner, sitting at the table and regaling them with war stories. The next day he couldn't stop vomiting. Four years of active duty had pretty much rotted his guts from alcohol consumption.

His parents decided to plunk him immediately into college, the way you might immerse a flea-ridden dog into a bath. Fortunately, Dick was ready to settle down. But two years of college and three of law school were not enough to erase all the effects of Army life; a trace of a drawl and a hard-livin', hard-lovin' manner clung about him. He served a mere four of his forty-six years in active duty, yet planned to be buried in his dress uniform, which he kept in his closet. On his desk, he kept a souvenir of Viet Nam: a brass mortar shell, shiny, erect. If he had flashbacks, it was not of Viet Cong, but of sugar plum fairies.

The practice of law was a place where he could continue to prove his mettle. Naturally, he saw it as a battle ground. He was forever defending the unpopular cause, representing the underdog. In *Murray v. Hoffman*, by every right the underdog was literally the dog, being dead. But in the scales of justice, Dane, six-foot two and two hundred pounds, was a lightweight compared with Sweetie, the toy poodle. Representing Dane was the greater challenge, and Dick Hedstrom was ready.

No sooner did the door to Dick's private office shut behind them than

Marijayne's confidence deserted her. She began to tremble so badly that she stepped right out of her left shoe, then collapsed into the nearest chair, blubbering and jibbering. All Dick could do was stare. Dane, meanwhile, began chafing her wrists, fanning her face with a folder he grabbed from the desk.

"Could she have a glass of water?" he asked.

Dick was already thinking of how he could use this emotionality in the court room. "What? Oh, of course." He rushed out to get water.

He came back in with the paper cup and watched Dane hold it to her lips. Water dribbled down her chin and disappeared into her blouse, which her husband had loosened so that Dick got an eyeful of lace and the outline of ribs under skin.

A good lawyer must be a good psychologist, too; Hedstrom was not, but he had learned to compensate by acting like one. He smiled at Marijayne and asked about the girls, while reaching for a legal pad and a pencil from the top drawer. His wedding ring was there among the paper clips; he always slipped it on before going into court, and sometimes during an interview, but not now. The Hoffmans had seen him with Sharon, countless times; there was no need to cultivate that image.

He glanced at the papers from the veterinary board, then listened to Dane's soul-searching explanation of Sweetie's last hours, nodding like an understanding priest. Dick liked dogs as well as anyone; the Hedstroms had one of their own, a "Heinz 57" with a body too long for its stocky legs. But when Dane got to the part about hiding the body in the cooler, he almost laughed out loud.

"So the dog was in the cooler for how long?"

"From about three o'clock Friday afternoon until Tuesday at ten,

when the Murrays came and got her."

"--Ray Murray broke his nose, don't forget," Marijayne interjected.

Dick nodded and added that to his notes. "And did you tell them at that point when she'd actually died?"

"I had to, she was stone cold. They wouldn't have believed me if I said she'd died on Monday. And I didn't want to lie. I'm not a liar Dick."

"Of course not," Dick said smoothly. "Just go over the part again about why you didn't just tell them right away on Friday. You say it wasn't anything you did wrong, but it looks as though you were trying to cover up, Dane. That 'mistakes were made.'"

Dane clutched Marijayne's hand and stared at the brass mortar shell. Marijayne had recovered and now looked at the mortar shell, too, wondering if it's something one of the kids made at school. Instead of answering his question, Dane launched into the story about how he his dog, his grandfather, and his pet gerbil in one freak accident when he was ten years old.

"....Grandpa had a heart attack, you see, at the wheel of his station wagon, and he threw the gear shift into reverse by accident. The car lurched back and came crashing right into the house. My bedroom was in the back and he pretty much demolished it. I'd left the room just minutes before, leaving Punky in his little plastic exercise ball, rolling around on the floor. He was crushed under the back tire."

"Punky was the gerbil?" Dick asked in all seriousness, jotting all of this on to his legal tablet.

"That's right. Old Simon had been sleeping at the foot of my bed, and he ended up being pinned between the rear fender and the dresser. He was killed instantly."

"I'm sorry."

Normally this story brought even Marijayne close to tears, but Dane had been repeating it so often since being served with the lawsuit, that she wanted only to laugh now. Next came the part about how he'd vowed, then and there, to become a veterinarian. You'd think he had devoted his life to finding a cure for cancer. She stopped listening and glanced around at Dick's office. She'd never been in a lawyer's office before, and she was not impressed: beige walls, linoleum tile floors, cheap posters in plastic frames on the walls--the kind you can buy at Target. The view from the window behind his desk is worse: derelict pigeons loitered on the grimy window ledge across the street beside a half-empty bottle of booze.

"I've been under a lot of stress lately," Dane was saying now.

Marijayne got up and, in her stockinged feet, walked around behind the desk and lowered the blinds.

"...and when Sweetie's heart stopped, something in me just snapped."

Marijayne snapped the blinds shut and the rotted cord broke off in her hand.

"Where's the body now?"

"Well, the Murrays took it on Tuesday, but they couldn't have buried it right away, because there had to be an autopsy. I don't know--"

Marijayne sat back down, saying, **"They buried her. I can see the Murrays' flower bed from the bathroom upstairs. There's a stone to mark the grave, and a bird bath, too. At night they turn a colored spotlight on the water and the light shines up into our window."** She was twisting the broken cord around her hand, making the ends of her fingers turn purple. Dane put out his hand to make her stop.

"Do you have the results of the autopsy? Never mind, I'll get those."

Dick put down his pencil and leaned forward, putting the tips of his fingers together. "What you've done, Dane, I'm afraid is viewed in some circles as a breach of ethics." He held up his hand before Dane could object. "I'm not saying that's how I see it. I understand about your state of mind and your emotional involvement in the case. But I have to be honest and tell you what I think the board is going to say."

Marijayne yelped and to Dane it sounded like Sweetie's voice from the grave. He slumped in his chair and reached absently to pat his wife's shoulder.

Dick continued. "Apparently the Murrays are going to try to take you for all you've got. Is the house in both your names? Better have Marijayne named sole owner. That way they can't get their hands on it." Now that he'd reduced the Hoffmans to abject terror, it was time to reassure them. He said, "But we can fight this, or at least save your license so you only get a temporary suspension."

Marijayne watched him with an expression of fear and dread, but also of flickering hope and trust. He projected all the confidence that Dane, still slumping in his seat, lacked.

After they left and Dick sat alone at his desk, he found that when he closed his eyes, he could still see hers, two golden suns whose blazing light reflected off the back of his retinas.

Sharon phoned to get a reading of his stress level. "You sound stressed," she said, ever alert to his every emotional nuance.

"I guess I am, a little," he confessed, sighing, knowing she would be sympathetic, and welcoming it.

"Poor baby," she soothed, trying to gauge the extent of damage done to his nerves of another day.

By its very nature, the legal profession is confrontational. Delbert had told her a hundred times that trial lawyers are prone to early heart attacks and premature death. The enormity of their responsibility, the emotionality of clients, the egos of testosterone-driven judges and prosecutors: all take their toll. No matter how sincere their pursuit of justice, the public perceives them to be scurvy knaves. Delbert had used those very words. "Only one kind of lawyer is viewed with more contempt than the trial lawyer," he'd said, "and that is the lawyer who gets into politics." She knew that: one of his key campaign supporters couldn't resist making lawyer jokes and wore a t shirt to meetings bearing that tired Shakespearean quip about killing all the lawyers. She felt that Delbert meant that, as Dick's wife, it was her responsibility to monitor his condition and keep him running smoothly.

No wonder Dick sometimes dragged his tail home after work in a state of near-exhaustion, his every nerve raw, the merest tremor of tension in the air capable of sending him into paroxysms of agony. The last thing he needed was to come home to a normal household, where children whined, bickered, squabbled, teased and taunted. Add to all this the fact that the man had just lost his mother, and it should be clear why Sharon felt she must protect him from the dark side of family life.

Typically, she began as soon as the children got home from school, jollyng them into cooperation, offering hugs and snacks, listening to grievances, helping with homework, driving this one to that practice and that one to this activity--in short, doing what every mother does in the evening, sooner or later, whether they work outside the home or not. But Sharon performs with intensity, and the doleful air of a Julie Andrews who no longer hears the music.

Tonight Dolly, the eldest, went directly upstairs to her room,

slamming the door.

"I thought you had rehearsal," Sharon called up, but got no response.

Soon appalling noises shattered the air: Dolly's favorite band torturing their instruments, screaming words Sharon had never heard until she was in college. She waved the younger children into the kitchen for homework.

The older ones helped the younger.

"What's six times nine?" Hannah asked.

"Four hundred ninety-three," Hunter answered right off, and Sharon refrained from comment.

Now Hunter wanted to know, "What are Michigan's natural resources?"

Sharon suggested that he look in his book. "Stupid," Hannah hissed.

Before Sharon could intervene, Hunter threw his pen across the counter at his sister. Dolly had come downstairs and entered the kitchen just then and caught the blow. Of course the pen splattered ink all over the front of her Bad Religion t-shirt.

"Mo-o-mm!" both girls bleated. "Hun-ter-r!"

"It's black ink, it's hardly noticeable," Sharon soothed.

Dolly took a two-liter of Coke from the refrigerator and began to shake it. Of course she was about to spray it all over her brother in retaliation for the ink on her t-shirt. Sharon knew she ought to argue for higher principles here, but there wasn't time. She invoked Dolly's self-interests instead. "That's the last bottle, and I'm not going shopping again until the weekend!"

Dolly ran to the sink and slowly unscrewed the cap to minimize the explosion.

Sharon's sigh of relief was lost in the fizz of carbon dioxide. She pulled

out a mixing bowl to make a meatless meatloaf and slipped back into Julie Andrews.

"Let's all help Hunter with his list of natural resources," she suggested as she dumped cooked brown rice into the bowl. She pointed her mixing spoon at each child in turn, who sang out a response to Hunter's problem.

"Christmas trees," said Hannah.

"Snow," said Wolfe.

Dolly smirked, thought a minute, then said, "Mackinac fudge."

It was downhill from there as they tried to outdo each other with silly answers. Hunter scribbled furiously, stopping only to ask, "Is road kill one word or two?"

Sharon did not object. For all of five full minutes, the children had cooperated. She slid the meatless meatloaf into the oven and washed her hands.

"Give me that progress report, Dolly. Hunter, hand me that science quiz." She wadded them up and tossed them in the trash. "You'll do better tomorrow, won't you? No need to mention it to your father. Now finish up quickly, children. Hunter has soccer practice, and I've got to get Hannah to piano. Spit-spot." Her Maria Von Trapp sometimes merged with Mary Poppins.

She was finishing up the potatoes when Dick called for a ride home. Could she come right away? Of course. Dick often walked to the office: the exercise was good for his heart, and what of the stress to Sharon's, having to squeeze in one more errand during the busiest time of her day? She'd meant to ask Dolly why she'd skipped rehearsal, but that would have to wait. After picking up Dick, she could swing around and pick up Hannah from Mrs. Beaulieu's house. Hunter was getting a ride home. She set the timer on the

microwave for the broccoli, strapped Wolfe into the car seat, and headed downtown to pick up Dick.

The microwave was pinging as they walked in the door. Dinner was ready!

No kudos from Dick for her orchestration of a complicated score. He'd been quiet during most of the drive home, and Sharon had anxiously gone over possible reasons in her mind. He had on one of his blue oxford cloth shirts. Was it the one she'd noticed was missing a button on the cuff when she'd done the ironing Monday? Why hadn't she sewn it back on right away?

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Look, if it's the button, just say so. I forgot. I'm sorry."

"It's not the button."

"I thought you said it was nothing."

"That's right, it's... nothing."

They drove on for three more blocks, getting stopped at every traffic light.

"But why didn't you sew the button back on?"

They arrived home, and as his shadow crossed the doorway, Sharon saw the potato peelings go scuttling down the wrong side of the sink, plugging the drain. Dick would have to take the drain apart, and he was worn out.

"Why did you leave the peelings in the sink?" he demanded.

"They won't go down the disposal."

"Of course they'll go down the disposal."

Sharon could cajole, flirt, and placate, she could make frantic gestures

like a starving pigeon in a behavioral science experiment, all to no avail. Dick insisted on his right to the pursuit of happiness, even if that meant being unhappy. Suddenly tired and cross herself, she rose to the bait. "No, they won't. They always get stopped up."

"That's ridiculous. Why would that happen?"

"Maybe because it's a ten dollar disposal. Maybe if you'd spent a little more for a better disposal, this wouldn't happen."

The doorbell rang. It was Delbert. After Bliss died, he'd agreed to have dinner with the family three nights a week, but he sometimes forgot which nights: after all, he was eighty-five and in mourning. Sometimes, like tonight, he brought his law partner, Mr. Withers, along, but that was all right, too: Mr. Withers was eighty-three and a bachelor. There was plenty of food: the kids wouldn't eat the meatless meatloaf, anyway, though Delbert probably wouldn't eat it, either. Sharon opened the front door for them and Janie, Delbert's German shepherd, charged in after poor Adam, who obediently abandoned his kibble dish and fled to the basement.

Holding the door open for them, Sharon saw Marijayne Hoffman next door, picking up the girls from her mother-in-law's. Treva helped out by watching the grandchildren in the afternoon. She never sent them home empty-handed. Tonight Beatrice was carrying a casserole dish and Eloise a foil package: bread, maybe, or cookies. Marijayne had a large gilt picture frame, probably something Treva picked up for her at a garage sale. Sharon resented it--no one fell over themselves trying to help her out--and at the same time she looked down on Marijayne as vain and spoiled.

She waved.

"Can you drive the girls to swim practice later?" Marijayne called.

"Of course!" Sharon yelled back.

Delbert always forgot that Sharon and Mr. Withers had met. He proceeded with the usual introductions. "Sharon, Harold Withers. We go way back. Harold, this is my daughter-in-law. She's Catholic."

They shook hands. Mr. Withers said he was glad to meet her.

"Am I late?" Delbert asked.

No one mentioned that he'd come on the wrong night again. Dick abandoned work on the drain and sent Hunter to bring in more chairs, while Sharon got out two extra plates and flatware.

"No, Grandpa, you're just in time to eat my broccoli for me," Hannah said.

Mr. Withers was watching her, and Sharon wondered if he was waiting for her to give a secret Catholic sign.

The children accepted that Grandpa considered their religion a topic for conversation. They contributed observations of other exotic phenomena in Vieux Chien. "There's a new boy in my school and he's a Mormon!" Hunter volunteered. Hannah added, "We've got an exchange student from Turkey."

Dick, ladling low-fat mushroom soup gravy over his meatless meatloaf, changed the subject. "Dane Hoffman came to see me today. He wants me to represent him."

"Oh, Dick, that's great. He's such a good vet and his parents are such nice people," Sharon replied. She winced as Janie, under the table, stepped on her foot, slouching towards Wolfe who, terrified of her, set his plate on the floor for her to lick clean.

"Dick, stop him. He's just given the dog his entire dinner."

Dick ignored her, or maybe he didn't hear. "My God, you should have seen the wife," he said.

Sharon couldn't read his tone, but she didn't let herself worry about the women who came to the office. Her marriage was solid--well, solid enough. The kind of woman that might pose a threat was the sort who might pull out needle and thread and offer to sew on his missing button. Marijayne Hoffman was not that kind of woman. When Dick went on to describe her hysterics and near-fainting, she chuckled. If there's one thing Dick could not abide, it was an emotional outburst of any kind.

Sharon smiled. "I'll bet Dane held her hand the whole time. They're obviously in love: always smiling as if they have some private joke," she said. It was enough to make her want to puke.

She could hear Adam whimpering in the basement.

"Could we put Janie in the back yard? She's trying to get Wolfe to give her the second plate I fixed him."

"No!" Delbert cried. "I just lost Bliss and now--" his voice broke, "--you want me to lose Janie, too?" His eyes started to tear up and everyone turned on her.

"Mom!"

"Sharon!"

"How could you--?"

"You've made him cry...."

It was useless to point out that the backyard was fenced in, that Janie would be in no danger. In this family dogs mattered more than people did. "Sorry," she murmured.

She got up and poured more kibble for Adam and took it down to him. He looked at it longingly, but wouldn't touch it.

"Eat it! It's yours! At least go up there and stand up for yourself. This is your house, not Janie's!" she whispered, but Adam sat down, looking

nervous and ashamed. Sharon knew how he felt.

When she sat down at the table again, Mr. Withers was telling the children about religious practices involving torture and human sacrifice. How had they gotten onto this subject? He was describing a head screw he'd seen in a museum in Cuba. "They clamped it on and started twisting--like this" He motioned with both hands placed around Delbert's head to show how this was done.

"No one's eating the meatloaf," Sharon said, to change the subject.

"Is that what this is?" Delbert grumbled, picking at it with his fork. He held one hand on his stomach and, from time to time, belched quietly. The brown rice was making his hiatal hernia act up. Sharon felt awful.

"It's a low fat dish, Dad. It's good for your cholesterol," Dick explained.

"My cholesterol is fine," Delbert remarked, as if to imply that Dick's condition was a defect of character.

Delbert, who grew up on a pig farm and remembered well how he ran and hid on slaughter day. Even so, his favorite foods are smoked sausage, bacon, pork seasoned with garlic and cracked pepper and slow-roasted at a low temperature all afternoon until the fat is crisp and brown and the meat slices like cake. On those rare occasions when Sharon fixed it for him, Delbert sopped up his gravy with bread and butter, with a gloating eye on Dick.

Wounded, Dick would bleat, "Have you forgotten my cholesterol?"

She was caught between Dick's cholesterol and Delbert's hiatal hernia and felt responsible when either condition acted up. Sometimes she wished she could hide in the basement with Adam.

Two

Dick's campaign manager, Chuck Upton, had urged Sharon to get involved in the campaign, so when she showed up for a meeting of the campaign committee, she expected to be given some role, some specific work to do. At the very least, she expected a warmer welcome than she got. The insiders looked surprised to see her or even a little put out. Dick, borne away by the angels to a place within the circle, left her standing in the middle of the room like the odd man out in musical chairs. The charmed circle seemed impenetrable, unwilling to accommodate her. Chuck gallantly pulled up an extra chair and had her sit next to him, where she was largely ignored during the meeting and in consequence, felt about four years old. As ideas came up and tasks relegated, she was passed over, until the telephoning committee came up. Then Chuck announced that "Sharon will work with me on that."

Afterwards, he mentioned other ways she might make herself "visible" in the community to gain exposure for the Hedstrom name: church, of course, and school, topped the list.

"I go to church, already, Chuck. Believe me, we don't want more recognition there."

Chuck seemed surprised to learn that Sharon and the children attend Last Shall Be First. "That's my parish. I don't think I've seen you--"

"We try to keep a low profile."

"What about signing up to be a lector?"

"Oh, Chuck, I couldn't leave the kids alone in the pew that long...."

"Well, then, how about becoming a communion distributor? That

only takes maybe ten minutes, tops."

Sharon considered this and finally agreed.

"Now, what else? What about school?"

"I'm a room mother for Hannah's class--and I've helped Mrs. Moore in the classroom for Hunter's class...."

"Yes, but sixth graders don't vote. We want something with more exposure--like PTA."

By the time he was finished talking up her role as volunteer, you'd think Sharon had the potential to run for the school board. No wonder Dick had chosen him as his campaign chair. Sharon smiled shyly at Chuck. If you ignored the broad, bald forehead, he was kind of cute, she thought.

Dick joined them, having finally disengaged himself from his "groupies," four or five efficient-looking, self-confident women in business attire, who held their shoulder bags poised like clubs, to ward off the threat Sharon posed--whatever that was. Sharon wondered if they'd be offended if they knew she was pregnant.

"When are you going to break down and start going to church with the family?" Chuck was asking Dick.

Dick began making excuses and promises, the way Hunter did when he brought home a bad grade that got passed Sharon's scrutiny. It was embarrassing to see her husband adopt a posture of sheepish defiance. "I'll go," he said lamely.

"Don't forget what I said," Chuck told Sharon, smiling in a way that made her stand taller as Dick hurried her away.

When Trixie Bonami phoned that afternoon about the big fund-raiser coming up for HeartReach, the pro-life emergency pregnancy service, Sharon thought, "This is just what Chuck had in mind!"

"It's our 'Bread for Life' booth at the Spire Square Fair in July. We bake all the bread ourselves and every loaf we sell comes with a brochure that tells about our services. Would you be able to help us out this year?"

"Of course!" Sharon was delighted. Dick would be pleased.

Trixie said HeartReach members could volunteer to host a bake-in, where everyone came to bake bread. "It's loads of fun," Trixie said. She always had a bake-in at her house, but not this year. Gus won't let her. "Let someone else have a chance," he told her. She wanted to ask Sharon before anyone else--it's loads of fun. "You've got a big kitchen and lots of counter space, and that's all you need. I'll bring the flour and yeast and a few other things. The goal is thirty loaves or five o'clock, whichever comes first. What do you say?"

"Why not? I've always wanted to learn how to bake bread, and 'Bread for Life' has such a ring to it."

By eight a.m. on what promised to be the hottest, stickiest day of the summer so far, seven women gathered in her kitchen to bake bread. Sharon was setting up a couple of window fans to at least keep the air circulating, when Trixie arrived with the groceries.

"You look nice," Sharon told her.

Trixie looked cool in a crisp navy skirt and linen shirt. The humidity had only deepened the wave in her hair. "Do you always get so dressed up to bake bread?"

Trixie's smile took in the whole kitchen crew. "Hi, everyone! Oh, I'm not staying--much as I'd like to. Something's come up. But I'll be back. I wouldn't miss a bake-in for the world."

Sharon took the grocery sack filled Trixie was carrying. Peering inside, she found boxes of confectioner's and brown sugar, packets of yeast, and

sundry herbs and spices: salt, oregano, basil, sun-dried tomatoes, cardamom seed, candied fruit.

"Is this all?" she asked.

Everyone laughed. "You've obviously never been to a bake-in," Trixie said. They all followed Trixie back out to her car and helped carry in four five-pound sacks of unbleached flour, a five-pound bag of granulated sugar, four cartons of eggs, two quarts of blueberries, three large packages of shelled walnuts, two quart-sized bottles of vegetable oil, three pounds of butter, a big box of raisins, sesame and poppy seeds, cellophane and plastic bags.

"Will we use all this in one day?" Sharon asked.

"Oh, easily," they all told her.

Trixie brought up the rear with a little metal box with recipe cards and Erik, strapped into his plastic infant carrier.

She deposited both on the kitchen counter.

"Please? I'd rather not take him with me," she begged.

"I'm sure between eight women, we can manage. He's always so good in church," Sharon said, though Eric looked put out and was turning red in the face, clearly working himself into a snit of some sort.

She followed Trixie out. "Aren't you going to tell me where you're going? You're not pregnant, are you?" She hasn't had a chance to tell Trixie of her own condition, and was looking for a way to break the news.

Trixie grimaced, pausing with the front door half-open. "Please. If I were, I'd be calling the hotline for help. I got a call this morning about a big donation--cribs, four of them. Pete Corrigan and I are going to pick them up and take them over to the offices to store them. Suffice it to say that it's a mission of mercy." She gave Sharon's hand a quick squeeze, then let herself

out. Her heels clicked on the pavement as she trotted towards her car.

Sharon started to shut the door.

"Wait—I almost forgot this!" Trixie was coming back, carrying a diaper bag, its sides swollen like a pregnant cat, stuffed with bottles, toys, and diapers.

Sharon glanced at the bag and wondered how long Trixie planned to be gone.

"Oh, and one last little thing. Could you take my hotline shift this morning, too? I knew you would, so I called the answering service and told them to forward the calls here. Remember—you're saving lives! I'll be back around noon. Thanks a million!"

Sharon dropped the diaper bag in the kitchen doorway, then carried Eric out to the TV room and deposited him on the floor, infant seat and all, in front of the TV. He was gnawing on his fist as if he hasn't eaten in days, working his legs and arching his back.

Sharon told Hannah, "Keep an eye on him for me."

Hannah didn't answer. Her eyes were riveted to a music video and Sharon saw a blonde, bare-shouldered, sheet-swathed, kneeling on all fours on a bed, her eyes getting larger and larger. She turned the channel to "Sesame Street" and went back out to the kitchen to help save unborn babies.

Hannah flipped the station back to MTV.

Sharon didn't know all of the women in her kitchen, who had set up various work stations and were measuring flour, cracking eggs, and scalding milk to dissolve the yeast as the two fans sprayed a fine mist of flour across the room.

"I'm Debbie! I teach the Natural Family Planning classes at church," cried a plump and rosy blonde, wielding a cleaver to chop walnuts. She

wiped a trickle of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "I don't know if it's the heat or whether I'm just ovulating today--but, whew!"

An older woman was grating lemons and oranges on a cutting board next to her, and asked Debbie about the classes.

"It's just another name for rhythm, isn't it?"

"Oh, no, no!" Debbie assured her. "We don't go by the calendar. We go by the symptoms of ovulation."

"Which are--?"

"Basal temperature, the position of the cervix, and the consistency of the cervical mucus."

"Sorry I asked," the woman murmured, setting down the grater to sweep together the grated rind and scoop it into a shallow bowl.

"It's very simple. You see, when your cervix is high up and firmly closed, you're safe, so to speak. It's only when it's low and open, and the mucus is the consistency of--of egg white," she pointed to the viscous string dripping from the egg shell which Carolyn Corrigan was holding over a mixing bowl, "--then you know you're ovulating."

"So you have to...." Sharon broke off.

"Oh, yes. You check yourself regularly. It's very simple. And the method is almost as effective as the birth control pill. The holy father says NFP preserves the dignity of man," Debbie declared.

"But what about the dignity of woman?" asked the older woman, who was squeezing the juice from the now bald halves of lemons. Her tone was as sour as the juice that collected in the bowl of the juicer.

"Trixie forgot milk," Carolyn Corrigan grumbled. Corgy was married to Pete, who was off picking up cribs with Trixie.

"I've got milk," Sharon said, taking an almost-empty gallon jug from

the refrigerator. "Will this be enough?" She gave the jug to Carolyn and began emptying the diaper bag, taking out one, two, four baby bottles that needed to go into the refrigerator.

"I'll stretch it somehow." Carolyn said. "Let me have one of those." She took one of the baby bottles before Sharon could object and unscrewed the nipple, then poured the formula into a saucepan with the milk from the jug.

As they worked, the women, all members of Last Shall Be First parish, discussed the latest news bulletin from church. Father Wirst had been arrested at a turnpike service plaza for "peeping in the men's room," and the high school principal had run off with a twenty-year-old nursing student from the tech college, not three months after his wife gave birth to baby number four.

Father Wirst would be sent away again for more therapy, but this time he might not come back to the parish. The women would miss him. He wasn't like other priests: he was easy to talk to, and personable. He held committee meetings in the rectory where everyone could have a comfortable seat. He put on some music--Father had a good sound system. He served snacks--and wine. He seemed real. Because he let his hair down, they could forgive him. "Let she who is without sin cast the first stone," Debbie murmured.

As for Principal Rippemoff, good riddance to any man who would run out on his family. He'd always been difficult to deal with. When a student was picked up for possession of marijuana or underage drinking, Principal Rippemoff self-righteously suggested the parents had been remiss in their duty and managed to make everyone feel they were no better. "Take the plank out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take

out the splinter from your brother's eye," Debbie remarked.

They discussed the arrival of the Nuyens, the refugee family from Viet Nam that the parish was sponsoring and who would soon be moving into the house on the South end that was being fixed up and furnished with donations of old furniture. Work was proceeding slowly because the house was in a part of town where no white person felt safe. Neither of the two black families in the parish was willing to help with the work. "It took two generations for our families to move out of the South end and we're not going back," they said.

The women discussed the layoffs at the bubble gum plant and whether there was any truth to the rumors that the plant would shut down by the end of the year. There's not a woman in the room who wouldn't be adversely affected by a shut down. The plant was the biggest employer in the region, and a major contributor to youth activities. But it was a big polluter, too. You wouldn't think so, but sugar leaves a sticky coating on furniture and can peel the paint right off a house. Everyone had a weight problem; even the ants and roaches--which were plentiful--were obese, and in the summer months, honeybees hovered everywhere, pollinating and cross-pollinating garden chairs and roses alike. No one needed air freshener or potpourri; aromatherapy had not caught on in Vieux Chien. Sometimes the cloying smell from the factory was enough to make you sick. But even the mayor denied the factory could be linked to the high incidence of diabetes and seven kinds of cancer.

All day, words and flour floated on the yeasty air. The more they talked, the louder they got, and the more Eric wailed from the other room. No one thought to check on him.

Now and then the phone rang and Sharon ran to answer it.

"Hello, HeartReach. Can I help?"

One caller needed an emergency supply of formula to tide her over until her next welfare check came. Sharon scribbled down her name and promised to have someone get back with her.

A fifteen-year-old wanted to schedule an abortion. She hadn't had a pregnancy test yet. "I can't have a kid--I'm a cheerleader!" she cried, with a logic Sharon couldn't quite dispute.

"Will you hang on just a minute while I get my supervisor?" She covered the receiver with a hand crusty with dried dough and asked, "Has anyone here worked hotline?"

In the next room, Eric wailed unchecked, abandoned by everyone, even Hannah. He'd wiggled out under the strap and slipped right out of his carrier and onto his back. Exhausted, he'd fallen sleep in his wet diaper. He was sucking on his fist loudly, dreaming perhaps of a gigantic breast.

When the bake-in ended at five o'clock, twenty-seven loaves, rounds, braids, minis, muffins, and four dozen dinner rolls were stacked on the counter. Dried dough plastered the countertops, flour dusted every surface, even the fronts of the cabinets, and red and black ants, crazed with the smell, tumbled frantically from the backsplash behind the sink to take away as much as they could carry or else drown, deliriously happy, in a puddle of lemon glaze. Hannah and Wolf, too, were drawn by the fragrance of fresh bread, and Sharon tried to slip them a mini-loaf of lemon tea bread.

Carolyn Corrigan stepped between Sharon and the counter.

"Do you intend to pay for that bread?" she asked.

Dick walked in just then. He stopped in the doorway and took in the whole scene.

Sharon proudly pointed to the pyramid of loaves as evidence of the day's output. But Dick seemed only to notice the mess, the ants, and the absence of a dinner cooking on the stove. His face was as pasty-looking as the countertop.

Now Carolyn grabbed an armload of bread and started handing it around: Hannah and Wolfe each got their tea loaf, while Dick got a braid, a round, a loaf, and a dozen blueberry muffins. What could he do but smile and cover his initial shock with a thin remark, "For a minute I thought my sisters had moved the bakery here." Then Trixie arrived to pick up Eric and Sharon helped her load the bread into the back of her van.

"It took all day to pick up a few cribs?" she asked.

Trixie didn't answer at first. Then, "Didn't I tell you this would be loads of fun?" she said.

Three

Another Sunday, and Dick was having déjà vu, arguing with himself as he drove towards Spire Square to attend Sunday Mass with the family. The knot of his necktie pressed against his larynx like a tumor. Even with the air conditioning of the Lexus on high, the heat oppressed him. He got caught by the traffic light at the corner of Halle Boulevard, one of those five-minute signals the Midwest is notorious for, that dam up a flood of traffic and then with aching slowness leak a trickle of cars to flow first this way and then that.

He looked all around. Why were there so many cars out already? Why wasn't everyone in church? He spotted another billboard, this one for the Outback Steak House. "No Rules, Just Right," he read. He liked the sound of it. Too bad it wasn't a church. He could go to a church like that. Directly below the billboard was the old BMW dealership that had closed years ago, with white brick facade and big plate glass windows--and another sign. He had to squint to read the black letters:

Unitarian Fellowship
Sunday Meeting 11:00 a.m.
Hetty & Melvin Groat: "Marriage and Mountaineering:
Climbing the Slippery Slopes as Man and Wife"
Guests Welcome

When the light finally changed, he turned sharply into the parking lot, very much in the spirit of Great-Grandmother Hedstrom, or of the founding members of the Fellowship, who twenty years earlier, had distanced themselves physically and dogmatically from other religious denominations, and established a meeting place squarely in the heart of the community: not in Spire Square, but in the commercial district.

The driveway wasn't paved and the Lexus kicked up a cloud of dust. Dick pulled of his tie and unbuttoned his collar, then stood for a moment, taking in the dry beds of landscaping rock planted with cactus and prairie grass. He felt like the stranger who rides into town, some infamous outlaw, or maybe just the Marlboro man.

He thought of Sharon with a small nagging doubt. Then he broke off a bit of prairie grass and chewed it as he made up his mind. Then, "Adios, sweetheart," he said, tossing the blade of grass, and sauntered toward the building. His heels digging in the gravel jangled like spurs.

To his delight, the entrance just inside the glass doors was plastered with posters leftover from the old days, advertising the Maverick, the Mustang, the Bronco. The service, or meeting, had already started, and he was aware of being watched as he made his way to an empty folding seat. Some eyes widened in recognition, making him feel like some lawman whose reputation preceded him. Wyatt Earp, maybe. He nodded, not smiling, accepting his due. He took a seat.

A middle-aged couple stood at the podium, showing slides. Both were short and the woman was on the dumpy side. You wouldn't think of them as the adventuresome type, but evidently these were the mountain-climbing Groats. The man said, "In this sport, you have to capitalize on one another's strengths. I have the upper body strength, but Hetty has more flexibility."

"Luckily, we both had trust," Hetty giggled and advanced the carousel to a slide that showed someone's red-clad bottom blooming over the soles of a pair of clunky climbing boots. "That's me, folks," she laughed.

In the photo, she dangled, for all her flexibility, about twenty feet above whoever was holding the camera--not Melvin. He could be seen standing above her, his expression beyond the focus of the lens. The two

were connected by a sturdy cord fastened to body harnesses, and in his hands Melvin clutched the cord as, in the next slide, Hetty scrambled to regain her footing.

"He literally had my life in his hands. Of course, if I had fallen, so would he--so don't any of you men get ideas," Hetty joked, and everyone laughed.

No mention was made of God or of a higher power, no suggestion of miraculous intervention on behalf of Hetty. She survived by her own efforts and the help of Melvin. The listener could see the power of Nature or the hand of God, a metaphor for the spiritual journey or the rugged road of matrimony--or no metaphor at all.

Dick put himself in Melvin's place, the rope in his hands, and oh--the rush he felt as he let the rope slip, just a few feet.

At the coffee break following the service, a tall, red-haired man invited Dick to the Saturday Night supper the following weekend.

"Everyone brings a covered dish. Bring your wife," the man said.

"I will. Thanks."

Of course, Sharon came along to the supper. She was his wife, his rib, his Siamese twin. Besides, someone had to prepare the covered dish. She made her green bean casserole, the one with canned beans and mushroom soup and those greasy little onion crisps on top. Once she'd set the dish down on the serving table, her role had played itself out, and she seemed not to know what to do with her hands. Dick went off to get drinks, and it annoyed him a little that she was still standing there, as if glued to the spot, when he returned with her plastic cup of wine.

She clung to him like a tiresome cough. Occasionally someone would

rescue him and engage her in conversation, and then he'd excuse himself and wander over to another group. From time to time, he looked up and saw her standing alone again, wearing a lost look.

Not wanting to let him down, Sharon introduced herself to a woman named Helen, a librarian, who asked Sharon what church she attended. When she found out Sharon was Catholic, Helen seemed determined to find some common interest as a basis for conversation between them.

"Where do you work?" she asked. "Oh, you don't. Then where do your children go to school? Oh, the Catholic schools.... Of course. Are you involved in AAUW? Then, perhaps the League of Women Voters?"

What, then, did Sharon do with herself?

At last she had something to say, and it all came tumbling out: how she'd helped to bake twenty-seven loaves for the Bread for Life booth at the Spire Square Fair. How her small experience that day with the hotline was enough to convince her to take the training and join the roster of regular hotline workers. She rattled off a list of services they offered. At some point she saw Helen's eyes glaze over, and her voice trailed off.

"How nice, dear. Oh, look, there's someone I've been wanting to talk to. If you'll excuse me--" Helen left her as quickly as if Sharon had just tried to sell her a vacuum cleaner.

"Well, of course she did," Dick explained later. "Helen is organizing the pro-choice booth at the fair."

Word spread quickly and Sharon soon came to be known among the Unitarians as Dick's Catholic wife, and they went out of their way to be kind in spite of it. For one brought up by the catechism of the "one true church," it was a revelation. Now she knew why Gus Bonami reacted so strongly to being called a "non-Catholic."

"I was a *Lutheran*!" he would protest.

For all that they agreed in principle that all faiths were equally valid, some of the Unitarians of Dick's fellowship clearly felt themselves more equal than others.

One time a woman by the name of Kathleen Gallivan proudly introduced herself as a lapsed Catholic and did a send-up of her experiences in the parish school, finishing with a mock confession complete with absolution, gestures and all, that she evidently thought to be the height of hilarity.

A college professor of mathematics frequently regaled the Saturday Night group with jokes, and these often included any recent word to come from the Vatican.

What was more bothersome was that Dick saw her discomfort at these incidents, but never came to her rescue. What, though, did she expect him to do? And why didn't she speak up herself? Dick said the fact that they could forget her differences meant they accepted her as one of the group, but in her mind, it only reinforced the fact that she was not, could not be, a member.

She wondered how they'd react when she showed up in a maternity top. But then she had a miscarriage, so she never found out.

She grieved, but at the same time felt as though a tremendous weight had been lifted from her, which in a manner of speaking, it had. She couldn't look at her Precious Feet pin now and hid it in her drawer. She'd seen the tissue Dr. Steinkamp scraped from her uterus, and yet when she thought of the dead fetus, she pictured a perfectly formed infant, kicking and squealing with delight.

Then Sharon's mother died suddenly of a massive stroke.

Sharon felt that God was punishing her. She had not really wanted a

fifth child; she'd killed with it with poisonous thoughts--and then she'd killed her mother, too.

She had no time to grieve over baby or mother, what with Dick's political campaign and *two* widowed fathers to look after. Her dad refused the invitation to come stay with them for awhile, believing that he needed to face his grief in order to adjust to being alone. He would come and visit maybe once a month, stay overnight, then head back for Lansing the next day. Sharon worried about him driving so much but she couldn't dissuade him from making the trip. Every other week, she packed up Hannah and Wolfe and went to her Dad's.

This was her routine: stock up on groceries for Dick and the older children, who couldn't miss school, catch up on the laundry, pack up the younger two and head out for Lansing. At her father's house, she did his laundry, got his groceries, and cooked him a couple of good meals. The house was unnaturally quiet and drafty. Her father spent the evenings sitting in his chair with the television turned on but the volume off and stared at the ceiling. The upstairs room she'd shared with her sisters was right under the roof, the sloping walls echoing the line of the roof. At night after the little ones were asleep, she lay in bed and listened to the wind and her whole life felt hollow. Sometimes she thought she smelled her mother's cigarette smoke. At the end of their stay, she drove back home, where she stocked up on more groceries, did more laundry, and made nice meals for Dick and the children to make up for her absence. At night, she lay in bed and thought she could hear the wind blowing through her very soul.

Dick resented these frequent trips. They were hard on him, he said.

The Rev. Damschroder was so pleased with the way the membership

brochure turned out that he ordered *five thousand* for a first run, in full-color separation. Sophie Davenport, the mayor's wife and chair of the finance committee, threw a fit. The Rev. Damschroder himself had to admit he'd been carried away. He stuffed brochures by the handful into his briefcase and left them everywhere he went. He spread them out on his desk so he could glance down at the beautiful Hoffman family. Sometimes, he thought he understood why Catholics worship graven images.

In protest, the officers of the ladies' relief society--the Rev. Damschroder's Furies--called in sick the first day of the Spire Square Fair. The minister himself had to help staff the booth and sell crafts.

His presence was a big hit with shoppers.

"I never expected to see a minister selling crafts!" they said.

The Rev. Damschroder played it to his advantage. "Why not?" he replied good-humoredly, "Didn't Jesus Himself say 'I am among you as one who serves?' Young lady, if your minister holds himself above working the craft booth at the bazaar, then perhaps you should 'shop around' for another church. We would welcome you to visit the Second First United Methodist Church any Sunday morning. Our worship service begins at ten a.m. Sunday School is at nine-thirty. Have a good day--and enjoy the potholder!"

His Furies, too, were quite taken with this new side of their minister. Sophie Davenport squeezed the Rev. Damschroder's arm and Vera Krause clapped her little hands together. "Does this mean you'll be coming to all the meetings of the ladies' relief society, Reverend?" she lisped.

The Rev. Damschroder looked up just then. There was Father Arnold Best, his hands clasped behind his back and wearing a look that must be like the one Christ gave to the rich young man who couldn't renounce his wealth to follow Him.

Four

The lawsuit against Dane Hoffman went well, considering. Attorney Dick Hedstrom tried to get the Murrays to settle, but they insisted on going to trial. The jury awarded the Murrays only five thousand dollar in damages; in their complaint, they'd asked for fifty thousand. Dick had expected they would get it, too.

But as he worked on his brief, he'd found himself believing that he could win the case. It was Marijayne who'd made him believe. After the first meeting in his office, when she'd gone into shock, babbling and sputtering like a ninny, she'd undergone a mysterious transformation. At future appointments, she projected such confidence that he couldn't help but believe he could win.

The hearing before the veterinary board went well, too, considering. Dane's license to practice was suspended for a year. He could have lost it for life. Dick's case was straightforward. Given: one highly qualified, skilled veterinarian with recurring nightmares about his dog's accidental death years before. Also given: one talented and accomplished toy poodle with a congenital heart problem. Throw in one childless couple whose whole lives are the dog, and you've got tragic flaws all over the place. Admitted: there was a lapse, but not of medical skill--of judgment. Dick argued passionately and eloquently--well, passionately, anyway--but to no avail. Someone on that veterinary board didn't like Dane Hoffman.

When the judgment of the board was read, Dane began pumping his hand up and down ecstatically, and Marijayne, attired in a lacy black shawl,

was soon dripping lace and tears all over Dick's sleeve.

They left the building together and spotted the Murrays' mini-van. There was movement in the back seat and through the tinted glass there appeared to be a man with a big, shaggy head. Bev Murray turned and lavished kisses on the mysterious back seat passenger and the whole rear end of the van shuddered with tail-wagging joy.

It was a St. Bernard.

"Look at that," Dick muttered bitterly. "They didn't even get another poodle. How torn up can they be?"

Before Dick or Marijayne could stop him, Dane hurried over and reached out one hand to tap on the window.

The van peeled away so fast, poor Dane fell off the curb and landed awkwardly. He grabbed his back as if he'd hurt it.

Marijayne ignored him and turned to Dick, concerned for his obvious bitterness.

"You did the best you could, and I am forever grateful," she murmured, letting her veil fall forward to half-cover her face. The lacy black gave her a Spanish look that made him dizzy. She reminded him of the flamenco dancer in Palma, and for an instant, he thought he smelled bougainvillea and the sea.

His license to practice suspended, Dane Hoffman still got up every morning at the same time and dressed for work. He left the house at the same time and drove to the clinic to check on the cats and dogs that had been kept overnight following surgeries which Dr. Brodsky now performed for him. He stroked their fur as he read their charts. They'd expanded the kennels in order to provide more boarding services and had added pet

grooming services and dog obedience classes as well. Lorraine taught him to wield the clippers and blow dryer and how to style fur to make a mutt look as smart as a Schnauzer. Every customer got a spritzing of scented flea powder and a yarn pompom fastened to his or her collar as a finishing touch.

Most mornings, Dane still drove out to make calls at neighboring farms and on the way stopped at the Dew Drop Inn for his usual bagel and brew. If she was working, Mary Beth slipped him a small bag of sugar cubes to take with him.

They say that news travels fast in a small town like Vieux Chien, but once outside the city limits it seemed to stop dead in its tracks. A surprising number of Dane's regulars had not heard that he was on hiatus and he was reluctant to tell them. They might take their business to another doc and then, next year, where would he be? He told them that he was breaking in a new man, that business was so good that, between the two of them, he and Dr. Brodsky couldn't handle it all. He told them he'd send his new man out later to vaccinate that dairy herd or have a look at that horse that's down.

Then one morning, something strange happened when he drove out to the Miller place where several dairy cows were about to calf. He strolled out to the barn with old man Miller to have a look at the animals, and when the scent of sweet hay and manure hit him, his gorge rose, his blood drained from his head, and he passed out cold, nose-diving right into a cow pie. It only lasted a minute before he was right back on his feet, wobbly as a newborn colt and embarrassed as hell, stumbling about and laughing and blinking like a madman, until Merle Miller became genuinely alarmed.

"You've got the shakes pretty bad there, Son. Maybe we ought to go up to the house and get you inside where it's cool," he said, reaching out to steady Dane with his own strong arm. But Dane waved aside all help and

tottered over to the stall where Mamie stood heavily on swollen ankles. Both vet and cow lowed softly. Dane stroked her head for a long time, feeding her the sugar cubes, "Thatta girl," he crooned while the puzzled farmer crouched at her tail end, and finally reminded him that "I think it's this end you want to have a look at."

"Of course!" Dane laughed, but he was woozy and sweating heavily and wondered how he'd make it outside without passing out again or being sick all over the clean hay in Mamie's stall. He crawled out of the barn on all fours, and when the solicitous Mr. Miller offered him a cup of coffee and a slice of fresh strawberry pie, Dane dove into some bushes and began retching helplessly. He emerged finally, his face the same shade of green as the bushes, but he grinned fiercely and joked, "Just a touch of morning sickness."

Mr. Miller wondered whether to call the paramedics, but Dane shook his head. "I'll be fine," he insisted, and amazingly, once he got behind the wheel of the Jeep, he was.

He took the long way back to town. The late June sun lit up the countryside like a high-powered OR light. Recent rains had cooled everything off. How could he bear to work in an office all day and miss watching the corn grow, the plants getting steadily taller, and lusher, until they filled up the space between the neat rows? Or the occasional splat on his windshield of a grasshopper or the kamikaze dive of a humongous bee that got lodged under a wiper blade? He stopped at a truck farm and bought two quarts of fresh strawberries and had tossed back half a quart by the time he got to the Amoco on the edge of town. After gassing up the tank, he spotted a man standing on the berm holding up a sign that reads, "Will Work for Food," and he stopped to slip him a five. He wasn't feeling generous, but scared. This guy could be him. "Thank God for Dick Hedstrom," he sighed aloud.

He decided not to go back to the clinic. Getting sick like that must mean he was coming down with something. Maybe he'd better go home and take a nap.

As the days passed, he spent less time grooming dogs and making calls and more time driving down pretty country roads. He kept his fishing rod and tackle box in the back of the Jeep and after lunching on peanut butter and jelly, he often took the turn-off to the reservoir and spent his afternoons trolling for salmon, though there were no salmon in the city reservoir and never had been.

And every day, when he got back into town, he saw the raggedy man with the beard and the sign, "Will Work for Food."

Five

Many times, over the past few weeks, Elaine had walked into Dick's office and found him staring at a blank computer screen or standing at his open window and smiling dreamily at a pigeon. Occasionally he moved his lips as if addressing the bird, silently but with feeling, in a way that reminded her of Billy Hasselstein's Romeo to her Juliet in the fall play senior year, the high point of her high school career--of her life, truth be told.

If she didn't know better, Elaine would think Dick was in love.

Then the gifts started arriving at the office. A bouquet of hand-picked flowers, a box of hand-dipped chocolates, delivered on separate occasions by Marijayne Hoffman while Dick was out of the office.

"Will you please see that he gets these?" she said sadly.

Dick didn't eat candy and Elaine and Margaret decided that the old men, Delbert and Mr. Withers, shouldn't, so any candy coming into the office went into the secretaries' private store. Elaine put the flowers on Dick's desk and he promptly knocked over the vase and spilled water on a stack of pleadings, then blamed her for it.

Next came the cards, one at a time, big pink or cream envelopes, addressed in careful, round handwriting, to D. M. Hedstrom, Personal, and with no return address. Finally, a package arrived in a padded envelope, addressed in the same perfect-little-girl-ish hand. From the shape and the feel of it, Elaine determined that it was a book. After Dick left for a hearing, she went into the office and looked around until she found a book stuffed between the cushion and the arm rest of the leather wing chair. She knew it

was the right book, because *Slow Waltz In Cedar Bend* was not a title Dick would choose for himself. Elaine flipped open the front cover and began to read from the dust jacket:

“...It was attraction at first sight between this maverick, middle-aged economics professor who still rode his beloved motorcycle from his teenage years and the introspective, dark-haired wife of a new colleague.

Her name was Jellie Braden, and Michael Tillman wanted her. Something deep in his bones had whispered, “That one.” And Jellie Braden, in her fortieth year, had heard the voice, too.”

Elaine couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing and took the book out to read it to Margaret. It didn’t take a law degree to figure out the allegory here. Subtle, this was not. Marijayne Hoffman was trolling for, well, some type of big catch.

To Elaine’s surprise, Margaret was appalled.

“I don’t think you should be going through Dick’s personal things like that,” she said, right off.

Then they looked at each other and, as the situation gradually dawned on them, their mouths fell open. It wasn’t unusual for a woman client to develop a crush on their attorney. After their case was resolved, they left gifts and messages just like this, but they got over it. The symptoms slowly improved and then disappeared. Dick always seemed oblivious. He was a pretty good sort of guy, a plain speaker in a profession where the only thing more slippery than the written language was the smooth talk. But this time felt different somehow. Margaret had an image of Dick’s wife and children wearing tragic faces and grouped like the March family in *Little Women*, bearing up as best they can in Father’s absence. Elaine felt wobbly, as

though someone had given her a good spin. She sat down suddenly.

"What do we do about it?" she wondered aloud.

Margaret, who believed that age gave her perspective, was inclined to wait and see. Time was on their side and Marijayne would wake up one morning and find herself recovered, as from a bout of flu.

Elaine, who believed that being married made her shrewder about such matters, was less sure. She had sized up Marijayne Hoffman and thought she didn't add up. Marijayne was all show. Any woman who had to keep freshening her lipstick the way she did was devious.

Then, as sometimes happens--"synchronicity" they call it (fiction writers say "coincidence")--came the ping of the elevator and the doors swung open to reveal Sharon Hedstrom, of all people, wearing no lipstick whatsoever.

"Hi!" she called out in her unaffected way, stepping off the elevator as if she were fresh from the farm, dressed more for yard work than the office, her hair pushed back from her face. "Is Dick around? I came to pick up my money."

"You just missed him," Margaret said, "but he left the money." She went to get it.

While she was gone, Elaine seized her chance and held out the book.

"Have you read this yet?" she asked.

Sharon glanced briefly at the book, and made a face. "Isn't that by the same guy who wrote *Bridges of Madison County*?"

Elaine held it out, "Here, look at it."

Puzzled, Sharon took it and fanned the pages. "Is it any good?" she asked doubtfully.

"Read the jacket," Elaine urged.

Sharon did. She laughed, just as Elaine had.

"I don't get it. Why --?"

"That came in the mail today for Dick from Marijayne Hoffman,"

Elaine whispered hurriedly as Margaret returned with the money.

"Oh, I see. You think--. Oh, that's--. No." Sharon handed back the book and, laughing, shook her head. "Dick's not a sucker for that kind of thing."

She sounded so sure, that even Elaine felt reassured. Margaret flashed her a look of annoyance. "We didn't really think so, either, Sharon," she said.

They all laughed. Sharon took her money and put it in her purse.

"Thanks, though. I appreciate the thought," she said. A few minutes later, she left and the secretaries returned to work.

Elaine had planted a seed of doubt in Sharon's mind, but she had so many other things to think about today that she buried it. As she drove from the bank to the post office to the grocery store, though, she felt the discomfort of something in the back of her mind, like the princess who couldn't sleep for the pea under her mattress. Then, after she got home and started unloading groceries, an incident occurred that took her mind off everything else that had happened that morning.

She was putting away the food when she heard Adam's frantic barking out front and, running to the front door, saw him chasing the mail carrier down the street. This was not the first time. Adam was the bane of the new mail carrier's existence, and Sharon knew it. The first time Sharon waved hello to this woman, she'd snapped, "If you want me to deliver your mail, you're going to have to keep your vicious dog tied up."

"I'm sorry--my husband doesn't believe in tying up the dog," Sharon

had said, "but I'll keep Adam in the house," she'd promised.

Adam? A vicious dog?

With the kids home for the summer, coming in and out all day, that had proved nearly impossible to do.

She called Adam inside now and he came right away, running past her and heading towards the family room, where Hunter was just coming in the back door. Not realizing that his mother had just called the dog in, Hunter held open the door for Adam, who ran right back outside again and charged for the poor mail carrier again.

Sharon had gone back to putting away groceries. Moments later, she heard barking again. It sounded a lot like Adam. But Adam was inside, wasn't he?

"Hunter--where's Adam?" she called up the stairs.

Just then the doorbell rang. It was the mail carrier.

"Your dog just bit me!" she announced, and displayed the tear in the seat of her pants. She proceeded to tell Sharon off, venting all the rage that had been building over the weeks since she'd been assigned this postal route.

"I'm so sorry, but you see, my husband doesn't believe in tying the dog up," Sharon explained again, which only made the woman angrier.

And that was just the beginning.

Next to arrive was the Animal Management Officer, demanding to see Adam's dog tags certifying that he'd had his rabies' shot.

"I'm sorry, but you see, my husband never got around to having Adam registered--but he's had his shots! I can call Dr. Hoffman's office and have him talk to you."

Sharon was fined and Adam was put in quarantine for fourteen days.

Then the postmaster himself telephoned and told Sharon that for the

next month, she would have to pick up her mail at the post office. In the meantime, she had better come up with a way to manage her dog, or else.

Sharon hung up and went and stood in the middle of the family room, feeling like the victim of fate.

Then an idea occurred to her so brilliant, she wondered why she hadn't thought of it before.

She went out and bought a length of chain and a stake and put it in the ground herself.

"From now on," she told the kids, "when Adam goes out, he goes on the chain."

Dick reacted almost as strongly as Adam did, but Sharon ignored them both. She could hardly believe how easy it had been to resolve the problem herself.

With Dane's case behind him and his campaign about to launch into full gear, Dick was more than ready for a vacation. The Hedstrom family always vacationed together, a tradition that had been interrupted only during the years when Eddi and Tommi were married and their husbands refused to go along. Those marriages that had threatened the cohesion of the Hedstrom clan had dissolved, however, and good riddance. Every year, the family spent two weeks at a cottage on Big Island in Lake Michigan, close to the Wisconsin side. During Bliss's long illness, the vacations were mandated as "Mother's last vacation." Now the pretext became, "Dad's first vacation without Mother." The family rented cottages from Mayor Gil Davenport's brother-in-law, a former Vieux Chiennien who'd given up the rat race of town life back in the seventies in order to commune with nature. Floyd was the brother-in-law's name, and he communed with nature mostly from the couch in the lodge where guests gathered to watch movies, have a beer, and shoot pool. The men would study the map of the lake and discuss the best spots to fish for pike, but everyone knew the lake had been pretty well fished out.

Each cottage had two bedrooms, a cook stove, refrigerator, indoor plumbing--no telephones, fax machines, or even television. There were ten cottages in all, fanned out along the lake front, atop a cliff that stood forty feet above the small sandy beach and boat dock. The weekly rental included a small aluminum row boat with motor.

It was a five hour drive from home to Ludington, where they got the

ferry to Big Island, and a thirty-minute ferry ride. But everyone agreed it was worth the trip. One year they'd stayed at a place closer to home, in a cottage that belonged to Mr. Withers's cousin, but that had been a disaster, and Dick blamed Sharon for it because she'd been the one to make the arrangements.

Eddi often invited friends to come along, while Tommi might bring her current boyfriend. Delbert sometimes asked Mr. Withers to come up for a night. Even Margaret had stopped once during a trip to visit her sister in Milwaukee. People were coming and going the whole time, and meals often had to be made to serve sixteen to twenty people. The women, of course, prepared the food, and cleaned up afterwards. Weather permitting, they pushed together a couple of picnic tables and everyone ate together.

Having come this far to get away from it all, they found excuses to drive into town every morning. They nearly always ran out of staples, especially toilet paper. The trip to the IGA became part of the morning routine. There, they bought the institution-sized cans of beans and tomato sauce. The weekly trip to the laundromat was another ritual for Sharon and Tommi. They carried their baskets inside the rundown unairconditioned building that smelled strongly of detergent and fabric softener. While they waited for a working washer, they spoke with other women who were folding clothes or looking through year-old issues of *People* and *Popular Hairstyles*. There was no place to sit, and little room to spread out, and what privacy was there when you were folding your underwear in full view of everyone? No one was a stranger. So what if they plugged quarters into machines that did the work for them? They were a community of women like any that pounded their clothes on a rock in a river in Africa.

In short, the vacations became a sort of female testing ground where

the women proved their mettle, bringing the comforts of home to the wilderness: lighting the burners on the old gas stoves before cooking the day's meals for a hungry crew, like cooks in the logging camps of yore, fixing things like chili and stew that were eaten from a bowl that you sopped clean with bread torn from the loaf. No one wanted to be caught wasting as much as the root end of a green onion. There might be half-eaten casseroles getting moldy in the refrigerator back home, but here on Big Island, the women prided themselves on frugality, while spending a hundred dollars a day on food. Sharon was the perennial tenderfoot, sooner or later wanting to eat a meal out that she didn't have to clean up afterwards.

The men had to prove themselves, too, taking out the little fishing boats in the predawn fog and returning hours later with the day's catch, maybe a couple of wide-mouthed bass. Having at least tried to procure the day's provisions, they sat around the rest of the day drinking beer and asking the women when the food would be ready. Dick enjoyed spending some time with his children, however. Two weeks of unstructured existence was not a good thing for them, and Dick mustered his long unused skills as a drill sergeant to restore them to something like purpose. At ten hundred hours they fell out and marched along the north side of the island in the direction of the abandoned church. Then they did an about-face and marched back to the cottage, where they arrived in time for lunch. While they marched, they sang, or else their commanding officer grilled them in arithmetic, spelling, and geography.

After lunch, they put on their regulation swimming gear: swim suits and tennis shoes, which were necessary to protect their feet from the jagged rocks and stones on the lake bottom. They marched single-file down the rickety wooden stairs to the lake. Hannah preferred to play with the stones,

rather than sand, shoveling them into her plastic pail and dumping them back out, over and over again. As she played, spiders crawled in and out among the rocks, warming themselves in the sun until their little feet got too hot, then scurrying into the crevices between the rocks to cool off again. Hannah put two of them into a jar and carried the jar with her for two weeks. She named the spiders Stevie Ann and Devon. Hunter collected leeches, big and slimy and liver-colored. He wanted to take them back home as pets.

At fourteen hundred hours, Sharon took Wolf back to the cabin for a bath and nap; the rest of the family stays on the beach until sixteen hundred hours when, crisp and blistered from too much sun, they trooped back to the cabin to change. Then Drill Sergeant Hedstrom moved his men out to the bait shop along the highway. They returned with Styrofoam cups of night crawlers that they placed on the refrigerator shelf next to the milk.

After supper, they fished on the dock until the spiders come out with the stars and began repairing their broken webs for another night's catch of mosquitoes and gnats. Then it was time for either Hearts or Scrabble, which for the Hedstroms, was blood sport.

Something was happening to Sharon this trip that felt different and that she thought of as a giving in to the undefinable sway of the island. She spent hours stretched out on the rocks, oblivious of the spiders, soaking in the sun. She swore she felt the rocks drawing from her body the carcinogens, the PCBs and PPCs and HDLs and what have you--all the bad stuff she'd been exposed to throughout her life. In turn, she thought she was taking in minerals from the rocks themselves. Lying there, she believed she had tapped into a psychic energy field. She could hear the electrons percolating as they flowed back and forth between the rock and her self. She could feel a current buzzing through her.

She didn't mention any of this to Dick or even Tommi. The sturdy Hedstrom common sense would assert itself and make mincemeat of her theory. Yet Dick sensed a difference in her, too--unless it was the combination of the heat, the beer, the twin beds, and the children's constant presence, working a number on him. Lying on the Army blanket in the afternoon, it wasn't Marijayne he thought of, but his wife. He imagined them coming together in a dozen different positions at once and fusing, never being able to separate again. It was sexual and not sexual at the same time. A spider ran down his back, and he imagined Sharon teasing him with the tips of her fingers, running them down the full length of his spine, all the way into his swim trunks. Sitting up, he studied her flesh, so pale it gleamed, so sweet, soft, and known, so responsive to him. He studied the curve of her buttocks and followed it until it disappeared between her legs. He leaned down and slipped his tongue into her ear and traced it around every nook and cranny. She never moved; it was as if she had anticipated it. He had no room in his being for any other woman. So full was his mind with Sharon, that the sequence of synapses that represented Marijayne in his head never sparked, much less fired.

This year, Dolly had brought along a friend. The first day on the island, they dragged their duffel bags into the larger of the bedrooms and slammed the door. No one saw them for the rest of the week, until the night of the big storm. Sharon and Dick slept in the room with twin beds. Hannah, who was supposed to share Dolly's room, slept with Sharon one night and Dick the next, alternating so that neither of them felt neglected. The boys started out each night in the main room, but soon moved their sleeping bags into Dick and Sharon's room, too.

One night when Dick heard Sharon get up to go to the bathroom, carefully disengaging herself from Hannah and picking her way round Hunter on the floor next to her bed, Dick climbed over Wolfe and followed her out into the hall. When she finished in the bathroom and started to open the door, he reached for her, stifling her frantic cry with his mouth, while backing her into the bathroom.

Sparks shot from her night gown as he pulled it, crackling, over her head. He turned on the shower to cover the sounds of their lovemaking, and the mirror over the sink quickly steamed up. Their bodies were slick with sweat and mosquito repellent, and Dick was so excited, he actually lifted Sharon off her feet. He came right away. They made love a second time standing under the water, all knees and elbows, thumping the metal shower stall and moaning with abandon.

When they finally emerged from the bathroom, damp but calmer, there were Hannah and Wolfe, chattering about the thunder.

In the morning, Dolly's door opened and she emerged, bleary-eyed, to ask whether they had heard the storm. No one in the other cabins had heard the storm, though Tommi and Eddi laughed when Hannah described it to them.

Sharon began wearing a flower in her hair and the legs of her shorts rolled. She went off by herself to pick berries. "Let's never leave!" she said. "Let's stay here forever and ever. We can be like the Swiss Family Robinson."

There was a full moon the night before their departure and, after everyone was in bed, Sharon stole down the shore for a last lie-down. She stared at the moon shimmering on the water, a widening white column, a beckoning staircase.

She never left Big Island, not even after she went home with the others the next morning.

Seven

The Bean Festival in August celebrated the crop that put Vieux Chien on the map, although farmers couldn't grow beans any more because of the sugar run-off in the water table. The Bean Festival marked the official opening of the fall political campaigns as candidates road in the parade featuring floats decorated with thousands upon thousands of dried beans, each one individually glued into place. It's not exactly the Rose Parade: the colors were downright drab and the city charter forbade anyone to tint the beans or in any way alter them by artificial methods. Hundreds of volunteers donated many hours to building the floats. The work was tedious and time-consuming. It takes a lot of beans to cover the cardboard and Styrofoam forms--chicken wire, of course, won't work. No wonder so many Vieux Chienniens have bad eyesight. But the floats had a kind of gem-like, mosaic quality that can't be achieved with roses. Best of all, the floats keep over the winter, and that's something they can't say in Pasadena. The same floats can be used over and over again, providing a sense of continuity to the Bean Festival.

Grand Marshall Mayor Davenport rode in a rented black Mercedes driven by his nephew, wearing a chauffeur's cap. The Mayor and his wife waved regally from the back seat. Behind the mayor's limo came Dick Hedstrom, sitting between Hannah and Wolfe on the back of a Ford convertible. Hunter rode up front next to the driver. He'd wanted the whole family to ride along, but Dolly flat out refused and Sharon begged off to take a video of the parade.

She tore around the parade route on foot, moving as quickly as she could through the throng, with her new video camera. She'd wanted a camcorder forever, but now that she had one, she couldn't figure out how to use it. So many buttons to push, so many things to remember. Thank goodness she'd played saxophone in junior high. Her family is in the parade and she wanted to capture as much as possible: every angle, every wave, every frantic scowl as Dick gestured for her to "cut." Her hands shook and it was hard to see what she was shooting, plus she was trying for artistic effects: fade in, fade out, zoom in, zoom out. She panned the crowd with a wide flourish to capture the drama and excitement and gave a full five minutes to Dr. Hoffman's Woofers and Tweeters, the last float in the parade. She relished her place on the sidelines, the more so for knowing it would be the last time she'd be here.

The following day, she and Dick would hit the pavement to begin distributing campaign brochures door to door. Dick planned to hit every house in every precinct between now and November. The brochure had turned out well. Tommi's boyfriend took the family photo showing them seated on the front steps with the house behind them, though Sharon had objected to being photographed at all.

"There's always a family photo," Chuck Upton explained in his usual patient way.

"But Dick's the candidate, not me or the children."

"Voters like a family man. Someone with a proven track record, so to speak, who can honor his commitments."

In the photo, Sharon had her face half-turned toward Dick. Possibly no political wife in history ever looked as happy as she did. She'd wanted to radiate her confidence in her husband, but Eddi had taken one look at the

proofs and said, "'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.'"

Sophie Davenport was everywhere these days, engaged as was Sharon in helping her husband's campaign. Labor Day weekend, she loitered in the lobby after services at Second First United Methodist Church after services, working the crowd. When she spotted Marijayne Hoffman, she bustled over, holding out a grocery sack, calling, "Yoo-hoo! Marijayne! I've got something for you!"

Marijayne paused.

"I know things must be a little tight right now, and I thought these might fit Laura. Bunny can't wear them any more."

Marijayne stared at the grocery sack, and as the realization dawned that Sophie Davenport was offering her a hand-out, she turned away--and bumped over a display of the Rev. Damschroder's notorious membership brochure. Brochures fell everywhere.

Equally embarrassed, Dane took her arm and hurried her through the crowd. Eloise, Beatrice, and Laura were close behind. Once outside, Dane offered to go get the car.

"Hurry!" his wife said.

"They're shoes--dress shoes!" Sophie had caught up with her and was pressing the bag into her hand. "I'm sure you'd do the same for me if Gil lost the election."

Marijayne took the bag just to shut her up and then turned to look for Dane.

"Where is Gil, anyway?" Sophie continued. "We've got a luncheon to go to at the hospital, if you can imagine--on a Sunday afternoon. No private life at all any more!"

Dane was pulling the Jeep up to the curb.

"I feel like some hillbilly hussy with no teeth!" Marijayne fumed when she got in the car. She lowered the window and got ready to toss the bag out onto the pavement. On second thought, she fumbled open the bag and pulled out a pair of almost new patent leather pumps. They're really nice shoes--and they look they might even fit her, if not Laura. She glanced up and saw Sophie Davenport and Vera Krause waving at her from the curb and cut them dead with a look.

Dane pulled the Jeep out into traffic, running over something in the street that tore off the muffler. The car roared down the street like a tractor.

The radio was tuned to a golden oldies station and in the back seat, Eloise and Beatrice were singing along at the tops of their lungs, "I love him, I love him! I love him! And where he goes I'll fol-low! I'll fol-low! I'll fol-low!"

Marijayne pursed her lips and punched another station.

"...liv-ing in a material world, and I am a material girl!"

"Mo-m-m! Turn it ba-a-ck!" Eloise begged, then changed her mind and chimed in on the last affirming *"I am a material girl!"*

She even imitated the little yapping sounds Madonna makes at the end of the line.

Still on suspension, Dane continued to take an occasional drive into the country to enjoy the fine weather and the changing seasons, though the pleasures of an afternoon of fishing had worn thin. He'd caught so many blue gill in the past few months--tossing them back in the river after carefully removing the hook--that he was sure he recognized individual fish when he caught them a second time. "You again!" He was sure the fish recognized

him, too. After school resumed, he got involved with the PTA. A father is a welcome sight at a PTA meeting. A Michigan dad, in particular, is more apt to put on a flannel shirt and coach hockey.

Sharon Hedstrom was another new volunteer, and the two of them found themselves manning the punch bowl at the hospitality table the evening of the middle school open house. Sharon was happy to have the night off from walking the precinct with Dick who, tired and worried about the election, hadn't been easy to live with lately. They hadn't even made their regular anniversary dinner at Way Back When. She often longed to be back on Big Island, but whenever she thought about it, she imagined being there without Dick. At least he was taking a sudden interest in Hannah's progress on swim team. He drove her to practice three nights a week and usually stayed to watch for awhile before hitting the campaign trail once again. He was a good father, she couldn't deny that.

"Where's Marijayne tonight?" Sharon asked, dumping out the contents of a bag of chocolate chip cookies onto a cafeteria tray.

"She's dropping the girls off at the Y for swim practice, then-- I don't know. I think she mentioned something about a sale at Jacobsen's. She'll be by later."

Sharon didn't know anything about a sale--she was not a Jacobsen's customer, and wondered how Marijayne could afford to shop there these days.

She suggested that they take turns going to meet their kids' teachers.

They chatted, they served punch and cookies, they each went down and met the teachers. And Sharon munched on Oreos, scarcely aware of how many she was slipping into her mouth.

It was standing room only most nights in the parent observation room at the YMCA as Moms and Dads vied for a position in front of one of the windows. The few rusting metal folding chairs were quickly taken. The room, tiled, unlit, smelled of chlorine and mildew. The back wall was plastered with announcements and a big YMCA poster that said, "Build strong bodies--and families." Tonight, though, an early flu outbreak had brought down the numbers of swimmers and parent observers. Dick Hedstrom and Marijayne Hoffman stood much closer than necessary in the otherwise empty room.

In this unlikely setting, in his fiftieth year, Dick Hedstrom fell in love. It would detract from the importance of the event to point out that he'd been in love on a number of other occasions, including the time in college when he fell in love with Sharon. Love was going around the YMCA these days like the flu. Even mega-doses of chlorine that turn blonde hair green were unable to stop the spread of either virus. A third of the swimmers ages 13-15 had crushes on each other, and the statistics for the 15-18 year-olds were even worse. At least half the girls in every age group had a crush on head coach Tim "Ironman" Black, while he was in love with assistant coach, April showers. A third of the swimmers ages eight and under would have the flu before the end of the week, including Hannah Hedstrom (Sharon won't get her anniversary dinner at Way Back When this year.).

But the aging immune system of the 40s + left both Dick and Marijayne particularly susceptible to infection. Maybe it's the chlorine, but when she turned those brown eyes on him, even in the dim light, he caught it before he could think to cover his nose. Her laughter when Beatrice collided with Hannah in the next lane made him feel like he had the time he ran a mile without stopping. Her laugh wasn't silvery or shimmy like bells, or even

bird song; it was more like the joyous yipping of a puppy at play.

He was telling her the misadventures of Wolfe at First Baptist Nursery School, where Sharon now left him two mornings a week while she volunteered for HeartReach.

"So, Sharon drops him off and hangs the backpack right there on his coat hook, and leaves. Can you imagine what Miss Jane would say if she found that bottle of wine in my son's backpack?"

Marijayne leaned towards him as he told this story, those amazing eyes riveted on his, her mouth open a little, and nodding expectantly. "No, what would Miss Jane say?"

"Let's just say that Wolfe might have been the first four-year old in history to be expelled from nursery school."

Her body went limp as she laughed helplessly, exposing her long white throat and emitting a series of "Yip! Yip! Yip's."

"Oh, Dick!" she gasped. "Stop! I'm going to wet my pants!"

She felt an odd fluttering in her stomach. Was it love?

No. It was intestinal flu, and Marijayne was going to be in the bathroom half the night.

On the other side of the glass, Hannah Hedstrom waved at her father to see if he'd been watching just then when she did a flip turn for the very first time, ever. Flip turns were what the big kids did. Until now, she'd only been able to grab onto the edge of the pool at the end of a lap and turn herself around.

But Dick wasn't watching. He was looking at Mrs. Hoffman. She saw Mrs. Hoffman's head close to her fathers, saw them laugh.

Beatrice was in the next lane. Hannah hissed, "Look!"

Beatrice wiped pool water from her eyes and followed Hannah's pointing finger.

"Our parents are going to get divorced and marry each other," Beatrice said.

She was joking, of course, and they both laughed. But there was something about the angle of their two heads in the window that reminded Hannah of a movie she'd seen once, when her parents were out and the sitter let them stay up to watch if they promised not to tell.

A moment later, the window was empty.

Dick cleared off room on his desk with a grand sweep of his arm, first removing carefully the brass ammo shell so he wouldn't accidentally impale her on it, then lifting her onto the desk, he began kissing her--exactly like a movie he'd once seen about another lawyer gone bad. Marijayne didn't tumble out of her blouse the way the actress had in the film, but he performed as well as the actor had--it was Harrison Ford.

Afterward, they apologized all over the place, while secretly gloating. They put their clothes back on and left the office.

"Let me get the hellavator," he said and pushed the down button.

"The what?"

"That's our word for it. It's always breaking down. But I wouldn't mind getting stuck on it tonight with you." He laughed at her worried look when the shaky old thing thudded to a stop at their floor and the doors creaked open.

Marijayne clutched the hand rail and watched the numbers as they dropped: 3...2...L.... When they stopped at LL, she felt cautiously relieved. But, of course, there was no H, No H, no fire, no brimstone. The doors

opened and the minister's daughter sniffed tentatively. The smell of exhaust fumes reassured her that it was to step out onto the pavement.

"By the way--why did Wolfe have a wine bottle in his backpack?" she asked, suddenly curious.

"Sharon stopped at Sonny's on her way and picked up a bottle for me for dinner. I was supposed to pick up Wolfe on my way home." He waved the question aside. "It's a long story," he said.

Marijayne wrote an entry in her diary while soaking in near-lethal levels of bath oil and Lysol. The fumes, added to the scalding intensity of the water and her purple prose, made her dizzy. Her diary entry was very much like the one Beatrice would write after the homecoming dance, only Beatrice's love scene would end differently, because she'd remember her mother's advice. "Boys don't respect a girl who's easy. I don't know if that's true. But I do know they stay interested longer."

Marijayne wondered if Dick would lose interest. She wondered if he would tell anyone. What if he confessed to Sharon?

She wondered how soon they could do it again.

She pulled her virginal nightgown over her head and announced before she even climbed into bed that her head was throbbing.

"Not another migraine," Dane murmured. "You poor baby. Want me to rub your head?"

Eight

Sharon took Trixie Bonami out for lunch to celebrate her fortieth birthday. They asked for a window table so they could look out at the parking lot and the discount stores across the street. They pored over the menu carefully, unable to decide between the chicken casserole and the chicken salad: when you don't get many opportunities to lunch out, you do it right.

They ordered, and sipped their raspberry iced tea, enjoying the tantrum being staged at a nearby table as a red-faced mother tried to quiet her little girl, who did not like being strapped into the high chair.

"It's not us!" they crowed.

The waitress returned with bread. "Is one of you ladies Trixie?" she asked.

Trixie turned the same shade as her iced tea.

"You have a phone call," the waitress said.

"I was afraid of this.... Trixie murmured and slid her chair out.

Sharon watched her follow the waitress to the hostess station. She hoped it wasn't the school calling to say one of the kids was sick.

She passed the time by watching the cars on Sloakum Road. The carpet place, she saw, was having a sale again. Little colored pennants fluttered in the wind at the used car lot next door. McDonald's was advertising another promotion, and a billboard asked, "What part of thou shalt not didn't you understand?—God"

She could never look out at the prospect of Sloakum Road without

thinking of her wedding day and the carriage ride they'd taken to the reception hall down this very road. She hadn't realized how tacky the wedding photos would look with the used car lot in the background, but she can never see a Chevy sign without her heart welling with emotion.

Trixie came back.

"You're looking pleased with yourself," Sharon noted. "What are you thinking?"

Just then the waitress returned. "I'm sorry. Trixie? You have another call."

Trixie rolled her eyes at Sharon and folded her napkin again. "I'm sorry!"

"Not at all," Sharon returned, figuring that Trixie was on call with the hotline.

The waitress brought their salads. Sharon was starving, but waited for Trixie, rummaging through her purse to pass the time.

She pulled out keys, wallet, lipstick, hairbrush, and a plastic baggie with an evil-looking, oblong object inside.

Hunter's dead goldfish! She'd meant to take it back to the pet shop for a refund three weeks ago and had forgotten all about it! She scooped the dead fish back into her purse, glancing around to see if anyone had seen it.

Finally Trixie returned and, sighing loudly, opened her napkin onto her lap and took a bite of her salad.

"Well? Are you going to tell me what's going on--?"

"I wanted to tell you before, but..... Do you remember the day of the bake-in, when I had to leave early--?"

"You didn't stay at all."

"Right. I had to take a crib to a client over in Climax, and--" she

giggled idiotically at the name of the town. "—of course, the crib wouldn't fit in my car, so Carolyn told me I could borrow her van."

Sharon was attacking her salad, savoring the tang of the grapes, the toasted pecans, the big chunks of white meat. She was only half-listening to Trixie, who was describing "how funny Pete was being" that day—well, he'd offered to go with her and what could she say? Those cribs were heavy, some of them! What's in this dressing? Not just mayonnaise.... They had so much in common! Who knew? He was so spiritual. Not to mention committed to Right to Life....

Sharon stopped mid-chew. "Who is Pete?"

"Why, Carolyn's husband, of course. Why are you looking at me like that, Sharon? We're friends! We go to Mass together on First Friday—how wrong can that be?"

"Well, in that case--" Sharon resumed chewing a bit of cool, crisp celery.

"He sent me flowers for my birthday—isn't that sweet? Roses. No card or anything, so I just assumed they were from Gus. But when I called him at work he said, 'Um, no. Wasn't me.'"

Sharon could just hear him. Trixie had him down perfectly. "Roses? A dozen *red* roses?"

"No! Ten *white* roses—for the glorious mysteries. The rosary, Sharon! Then Pete called and said, "'Want to get together later and pray?'"

Sharon about choked. She took a sip of her tea. "And did you?"

"We did. We meditated. You know the third mystery—the descent of the Holy Spirit? Pete had some deep insights there."

"Tell me."

"Well, he said that when the Holy Spirit appeared as little tongues of

fire, it was only enough light to show the Apostles the first steps along the way. Like flashlights, the kind that miners wear on their hats. But it was enough to get them started trekking down the minefield of life."

Sharon nodded slowly. "Mining is dangerous, Trixie," she said.

After lunch, they went to the restroom, laughing because they'd vowed not to, not today, not when they didn't have to haul the kids around with them.

Then they hit the white sale at Sears, where Trixie stocked up on towels and bedding. Sharon breathed easier after that. No woman bent on destroying her marriage was going to spend good money on a mattress pad, of all things.

Sharon knew all along that the gods would exact a price for her afternoon of leisure. Next day Wolfe was running a temperature of 103 degrees. She had just hung up from talking with the doctor's office when the phone rang again. It was Trixie.

"Listen, Sharon. I have a favor to ask. Gus's mother died last night--."

"Oh, no! Trixie, I'm sorry. You didn't mention that she'd been sick."

"She wasn't. It was very sudden. A heart attack. Anyway--." Clearly, her mother-in-law was beside the point. "We're driving back to Defiance today and I don't know how long we'll be gone."

"You want me to feed the dog?"

"Oh, sure." Clearly, the dog was beside the point, too. "Sharon, listen. In a little while, you're going to be getting a phone call from Pete."

"I am?"

"Yes. And if he asks you what I want for my birthday--"

"What? I thought he sent flowers."

"He did. I know, enough is enough, but not for Pete. Anyway, tell him something small. Like maybe a charm for my bracelet."

"Why can't you tell him yourself?"

"How can I? Gus is here!"

"By the way, what did Gus think about the white roses Pete sent you?"

"He never asked. Sharon, I could move out and Gus wouldn't notice until his supper wasn't ready on time."

"A charm. What happens if Gus decides to get you a charm, too, and he shows up at the jeweler's, and there's Pete?"

"I'm not the only woman in town with a charm bracelet."

"Well, what is Gus going to say if you all of a sudden have not one, but two new charms?"

"It's not like he's got all my charms memorized. I've got twenty-six charms, Sharon."

"I wish I had half your charm."

"Tell Pete maybe a little gold heart. Okay? For HeartReach, Sharon. We're friends, and HeartReach brought us together."

"You make it sound like a dating service."

"Will you do it?"

"I don't know. Listen, I hear someone being sick, and it may be me. I've got to go. Give Gus my best." Sharon hung up. Her hand was actually shaking, she was so angry at Trixie. How could she be thinking of herself when Gus had just lost his mother?

On the other hand, what's wrong with Gus that he's not even curious about who might be sending his wife roses?

When the phone rang a while later, Sharon didn't pick up. She wished

she had the moral courage to tell Pete off, but she didn't. But she was damned if she'd be a part of any friendship that had to be conducted behind Gus's back.

Later, in bed, she told Dick about the roses and asked what he thought.

"About what?"

"Do you think they're just friends?"

"Nope."

"Do you think I did the right thing?"

"Yep."

"But don't you think it's odd that Gus wouldn't be the least bit curious about who had sent the roses? I mean, someone that clue less. It almost serves him right, doesn't it? Dick?"

It was very quiet on his side of the bed, but from the quiet sound of his breathing, she didn't think he was asleep.

Nine

The last few days before the election were sheer agony. The radio station broadcast the debate between Dick and the incumbent, then a panel of locals took it apart and gave their opinion of each candidate's performance. Someone asked the two lawyers about their views on abortion, and Dick deftly turned the question aside by saying the city attorney wouldn't have to deal with the issue. One member of the panel later charged him with evading the question, and Sharon recognized the man as a Right-to-Lifer. She felt betrayed. If the people of Vieux Chien didn't elect her husband, Sharon wondered if she could continue to live in this town. He'd worked so hard. Bliss would be proud. Delbert bought cigars he intended to pass out election night at the "victory" party. Even Sharon's dad was coming to town for the event and would work the phones election day. Sharon baked a special cake and decorated it to look like Dick's campaign signs: red, white, and blue. Eddi and Tommi wanted to do the cake, but for once she stood up to them and said no. They could do the hors d'oeuvres, the pastries, the rolls, but she would do the cake. Then she heard that Cindy Baldaur, the incumbent's wife, had ordered their cake from a bakery in Detroit. It figured that Sharon would go about things the wrong way. Her cake had heart, Trixie said, but she knew it lacked that polish men of standing expected from their wife. The same thing had happened with the campaign t-shirts: she'd made a shirt for the four kids and herself, ironing on the letters with painstaking care. They greeted Dick one night when he stopped by for a quick bite wearing their t-shirts. He'd been touched, but embarrassed. "We have t shirts," he said,

"hundreds of them." Of course Sharon's design looked silly next to the ones from the supplier. Image was everything, Chuck Upton said, and she pulled her homemade shirts for the rag pile.

Their mothers would be sorely missed at the party; victory, if it came, would be tinged with sadness. So many sad events in the space of a few months! Both their mothers, and the baby, too. Well, Eddi always said bad things happen in threes, so that should take care of things for awhile. Dick would win the election and all would be well.

Election day was frantic with activity. Dick left early to vote when the polls opened; Sharon had to get the kids off to school first and organize things at the house for her dad's visit. About ten o'clock, she headed downtown to campaign headquarters and helped with the telephoning. Around noon, Chuck Upton held a briefing and said some of them would be sent to the polls to check on voter turn-out. Volunteers raised their hands and paired up. Two by two they would go, like the Apostles.

"I'll go with Dad," Dick offered.

Sharon had automatically stood up when he did, expecting to go with him. Embarrassed and knowing she must look a little lost, she turned to go back to her seat, when Chuck said, "Sharon is going with me." He was rescuing her, and not for the first time.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Sharon went home early to be there when her dad arrived. Then he insisted on working the phones, too, so Sharon took him downtown and gave him a list of names to call.

"Now, all you do is say you're on Dick's campaign committee and remind them to vote," Sharon told him.

"You don't have to tell me what to say," Frank assured her, already

dialing the first number on his list.

Frank's first couple of calls went by the book, but then he began to improvise.

"...because I'm his father-in-law, that's why," he said to some. Others he engaged in discussion. He soon had the volunteers in stitches. Sharon didn't know when she'd last seen him having so much fun. Someone told her, "I swear, if Dick wins, it'll be because of your dad."

She left around two to be there when the kids got home from school and to start dinner. In the middle of her preparations, a florist arrived with a single red rose. It was for her. She was pleased--a little thrilled, really. Naturally, she thought it was from Dick, and her hands shook as she tried to open the small envelope. She was already weeping when she read the message on the card:

Whoever wins, I know this election won't come
between our friendship.
Best wishes, Cindy Baldaur.

"If Dick wins, I promise to learn to have this much class," she breathed.

She didn't know what the Republicans were serving at the Baldaur victory party, but the Democrats were having more of the same old campaign fare: chicken wings, meatballs, cheese and crackers. Tommi and Eddi supplied trays of fancier offerings: cream puffs, cheese puffs, finger sandwiches and such. Sharon planted herself near the refreshment table, determined to glitter as a proper political wife should.

"My, doesn't the food look wonderful!" said Trudy Damschroder, heaping her plate with cocktail wienies.

The dazzle of diamonds on Gay McKenzie's fingers caught her eye. The wife of the town millionaire helped herself to chicken wings, and said, "Hello, dear. How are you?" then turned to discuss plans for the newest attempt to revitalize downtown with the president of city council.

Sharon smiled at everyone. "Hello. Hi. How are you?" she said. Later, she'd say, "Thanks for coming! Thanks for your support! Good night!" She was unsure what to say in between. She saw many familiar faces. The same faithful showed up at one fund raiser after another, and Sharon wondered how they managed, time and again, to dig into their pockets and pull out a contribution. They must think a great deal of Dick to be so generous. She felt grateful, touched by their loyalty. She had a new appreciation for her husband. What a lucky woman she was!

"Hi, Sharon!" It was Marijayne Hoffman in a sequined tunic that outdazzled Gay McKenzie's diamonds. "That's a nice dress," she said. Her eyes slid towards Sharon's thickening waist.

Sharon laughed and pinched her middle. "Campaign food," she said. "How have you managed not to put on a few pounds--you've been coming to a lot of these events. And--." She started to tear up again. "--I'm so grateful! It means so much to me--." Sharon pulled a crumpled tissue from her handbag and dabbed her eyes.

Marijayne laughed. She often laughed at things Sharon said and it made her feel appreciated. She felt they were on the verge of friendship. The campaign had given her so much. Dane had come to only a couple of fund raisers--he was busy at the clinic, Marijayne would say and roll her eyes, wife-to-wife, as if to say "Men are all alike."

They watched the others, Marijayne asking, "Now who's that?" and "How does he fit in?" and Sharon told her what little she knew. Clearly

she'd been wrong about Marijayne: she wasn't manipulative, the prom queen who never forgot her place in the spotlight. So her mother-in-law did a lot for her--but maybe that was old Mrs. Hoffman's initiative; maybe Marijayne didn't encourage it.

"Oh, look! Chuck is getting ready to introduce Dick! Shhhh!"

Sharon was too excited herself to wonder at Marijayne's enthusiasm.

The polls had closed and the returns were coming in. Dick was ahead already. Rousing cheers went up and drinks raised to victory. The tone for the evening was set and the excitement never abated. Dick held onto his lead all night.

Meanwhile, Sharon continued practicing her role as gracious political wife, the jewel in her husband's tie clip. She approached a circle of men in black suits, determined to wedge herself into the circle and join the discussion. But how? They were ministers, she saw. They wore their collars like halos that had slipped and held them by the throat. The Rev. Damschroder, the Rev. Paul Schrader, the Rev. Otis Brown, and two others she didn't know by name. Strange how Dick had attracted so much support from the religious community. Even Chuck was a former seminarian.

As she watched, a short, heavyset woman, also in black, with breasts like torpedoes, came up and easily stepped into the magic circle. It was Beren Mercouri, the president of the Unitarian Fellowship. Sharon watched her technique: using both shoulders and her breasts, she cleared a space for herself, bouncing the men back on either side, first one and then the other. Boing, boing.

Sharon lacked the equipment to do that. But she would try. Her point of entry would be the link already weakened by Beren. A woman, Beren might yield her some ground. She stepped forward and planted one foot

between Beren's left patent leather pump and the Rev. Damschroder's right wingtip. Neither would move to make room for her other foot, but she would not give up.

She turned her body sideways, facing Beren, and sucking in her stomach, plunged her arm between the Revs. Mercouri and Damschroder. It was her left arm, the one holding her drink, and it dangled there between them like a beggar's cup, but still neither would move over and grant her entry into the circle.

Awkwardly, Sharon announced her presence. "Hi! Aren't you Beren Mercouri? I'm Dick's wife, Sharon!" she cried with false heartiness.

"Yes, I know who you are," the Rev. Mercouri replied, and reluctantly swayed to the right enough that Sharon was able to lean in and face the others. They were discussing the proposed plans to build a new community center for the black community. Was that a good idea? They just completed the new YMCA last year--wouldn't it be better for everyone to use the same facility and to use the money for something else? But what did she know? Who was she, anyway? Besides, she was standing on one foot like a crane and having to concentrate very hard just not to fall over.

For one blessed moment she stood in the circle, and then, like elevator doors, black-clad arms closed in on either side of her, elbows first, then shoulders. She still had one foot on the magic circle, but that was all. She felt like an inkblot. In the circle, out of the circle. She pulled her foot back and headed for the rest room.

When she came out again, the lights had been turned down and people were dancing. And there was Dick on the dance floor with a woman in a pink sweater. They took a turn around the floor and then he let her go, and another woman took her place. Sharon looked and saw a whole line of

women waiting to dance with her husband. What could she do but look on and smile good naturedly, though the smile felt so unsteady, she almost had to hold it in place with her fingers. Then dear Chuck pulled her onto the dance floor, and men began lining up to take their turn, too. At one point she found herself in her father's arms.

"That's quite a husband you've got," he said, and now it felt a little odd to be hearing it. She was proud, she was grateful, but she didn't need to be told to feel that way. And surely her father, of all people, might be telling Dick the same thing about her.

Sharon had to leave before eleven to take the children back home. In fact, she heard that he'd won the election over the car radio. By the time she arrived back at the Elks ballroom, the place was jumping. She was lifted up by the crowd and handed forward onto the platform next to Dick, and when she reached out to embrace him, he leaned forward suddenly and she found herself embracing Chuck Upton instead. He didn't seem to mind a bit.

Tommi and Eddi pulled Dick down and did a victory lap around the ballroom, carrying him like a trophy. His childhood flashed before his eyes: it was the mouse prince and the sugar plum fairies all over again.

The party went on into the small hours and Sharon left early to take Frank home. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the glitter of Marijayne Hoffman's tunic top but she was too tired to wonder that she was staying so late at Dick's party.

Ten

Dick wouldn't take office until the end of December. Meanwhile, campaign brochures and fund raisers gave way to strings of Christmas lights and making gift lists. He felt the letdown that follows any major life event. Like a bride whose courtship and bridals are over and she finds herself a wife, Dick's stature as a statesman was already being deflated to of a common politician as the *Evening Howl* questioned the proposed pay hike for several city officers, including city attorney. At home the focus had shifted to the children as Sharon prepared to gratify their hearts' desires. When she told him--told him--to get down the tree decorations from the attic, he said, "I guess I know where I stand in this family," and she'd laughed. Well, some of the women in his life appreciated him.

Sharon woke one steely cold morning to the grating of metal hangers as Dick searched the closet for a clean shirt. She knew his search was in vain. She'd forgotten to do the ironing again and there would be hell to pay for it. Dreading his tirade, she sprang from the bed and, high-stepping on the cold floorboards--where were her slippers?--offered to go downstairs right away and iron one.

To her amazement, Dick grabbed her by the night gown and pulled her close, then ran his hands down her back, cupping her buttocks as he backed her toward the bed and lowered them both onto it. It felt good to get back onto the warm mattress and, after her initial surprise that the day would not begin with anger and accusations, Sharon gave herself up completely to the sweetness of being desired. Her upper body goose pimped in the chill of

the unheated bedroom, the touch of Dick's cheeks, cold and smooth from having just shaved, and his gritty, minty tongue, but soon the heat being generated under the covers spread everywhere. Sharon always came quickly but more deeply in the mornings, while in her mind she saw circles spreading out widely on the surface of a pond.

Dick whispered, "You stay in bed. I'll iron myself a shirt." He kissed the top of her forehead and got up off the bed, then clomped down the hall and the creaking stairs, careless that he might wake the children. She continued to lie there seeing pond circles, but as always when he offered her the rare option of staying in bed, she wanted to get up. She hurried downstairs and made him breakfast, which entailed pouring out his lowfat granola into a bowl and handing him the milk.

She sat next to him and watched him consume his cereal --along with Adam, who waited at the master's feet for a morsel to drop on the floor. Wife and dog waited as he wiped his mouth with his napkin, and tripped over each other as they followed him out to the hall, where Sharon helped him into his overcoat and pulled down the ear flaps of his aviator cap for the walk to the office, while Adam danced around his feet, whimpering as if he wanted to help, too.

"Anything special on your calendar for the day?" she asked and he seemed to miss a beat before saying he had a hearing in Detroit and would be out of the office most of the day.

"Well, don't forget the swim banquet tonight. I've got to think of something to take." Probably her tried and true green bean casserole.

"Why don't you make a Key Lime Pie?" he asked.

Key Lime Pie was his favorite, but the calories and the fat--you needed a PhD in astrophysics to figure it out. Dick knew his stellar performance this

morning deserved a reward, but Sharon suspected this was a trap. If she mentioned his cholesterol, would he put on a wounded air? If she agreed to make the pie, would he remind her tartly of his triglycerides? But then, he was being so sweet this morning—why must she doubt him always?

She smiled mysteriously. "I'll surprise you," she said.

Score one for Sharon.

Dick left and she'd decide later about the covered dish for the banquet.

First the children must be gotten off to school, and Hunter had to take in a canned good for the food bank, while Hannah had forgotten to mention that the gift for a needy child was due today, and Wolf's preschool was making ornaments and he needed a photo of himself as a baby. Of course none of them could take the school bus: there was no bus to the high school, Hunter got motion sickness and Hannah was too fragile to deal with swarming barbarians at such an early hour. Sharon would drive them all to their four different schools. The route took forty minutes to complete, but so what? She had the time; she didn't work. She considered this one of the advantages her lambs enjoyed over those poor wretches, the latchkey kids.

Her errands sent her crisscrossing through town, past the Revolving Calendar in Spire Square that duly noted the round of holiday events for December: the parade--there was always a parade, the Christmas tree festival, the Messiah sing-along at the Presbyterian church, and past the crowd gathered outside First Shall Be Last Church, many of them holding candles, presumably for some type of vigil for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

But wasn't that yesterday, the 8th? A holy day of obligation. She'd forgotten all about it--thank God. She'd been spared the hassle of dragging the kids to Mass in the middle of the week.

She stopped at the light in front of the library, and while waiting for it to change, looked for Superman. There he was, approaching the main entrance, wearing his cardboard Burger King crown and the cape of his costume pushed back off his stocky shoulders. She honked and he turned and waved. The red S on his thermal undershirt stretched tightly across his paunch. Like any king, he ignored the cold, though with every breath, little shots of steam rolled from his nostrils. Sharon bit her lip and waved back. Receiving the pope's blessing couldn't have moved her more. You always saw him along Market, somewhere between Dairy Queen and the library, and worried about him if he wasn't around.

The light changed and she turned onto Grand Boulevard, just to drive past the stately old houses. The Hoffmans, she saw, had two wire-framed illuminated reindeer in their yard this year. Well, Dane was a vet, after all. In fact, she'd never seen so many of the reindeer in one neighborhood. They ought to put up a deer crossing sign.

Two more traffic lights and a major intersection (a recent study showed Vieux Chien to have three times as many traffic signals as other American towns of the same size.), and then she was at Sonny's. To her amazement the parking lot swarmed with cars and people. This crowd was much bigger than the one in Spire Square. Mystified, she decided to give it a chance to thin before she ran in for her few items. She headed for Rinky-Dink's instead to pick up gifts for Dick's sisters.

If "The Sun Always Shines" at Sonny's Supermarket, as the slogan said, then "It's Always Christmas at Rinky Dink's Department Store," and Sharon found herself humming the jingle as she drove up and down the parking lot, waiting for a slot to open up. She didn't have to wait long: there was always a steady stream of shoppers coming and going at Rinky Dink's.

Shoppers went through the revolving doors with their revolving charge account cards in hand and circled the store, browsing the merchandise displayed on carousels--and never seemed to make a dent in the inventory. If you took down one plush teddy bear from the display of hundreds, another plush teddy bear slid into its place. They never ran out of anything. Once they stocked an item, it was always available. Merchandise that didn't sell during the holiday season got marked down afterward, then marked up again the following year. Sharon suspected that they didn't have buyers, only dusters. She went through the sweaters on a revolving rack and picked out matching red ones for the brothers Bagnacalda. They liked to dress alike and red was their color. With difficulty she pulled the sweaters from the rack, knocking several others to the floor which she tried vainly to replace. But there was no room. She laid them over the rack instead. Such abundance occasionally wore her out and, on a bad day, made her want to scream; today it only added to her sense of well-being. Rinky-Dink's was the only locally-owned department store left in town and it was a good sign when they could keep it well-stocked. She took the sweaters to the check-out, humming bars of "La Mer" while pond circles rippled in the back of her mind.

"My, you look happy this morning," said the cashier, whose name tag identified her as "Frieda." "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

To change the subject, Sharon commented on the crowd outside Sonny's. "I what's going on," she said.

Frieda expressed surprise that Sharon hadn't heard about the vision. She passed her scanning wand over the sales tags on Sharon's sweaters and proceeded to tell her all about it.

Last night, a clerk coming off her shift was pushing her grocery cart through the snow and ice in the parking lot--they were having a special on

chuck and she--the clerk--had bought ten pounds. She was planning on freezing it as soon as she got home. The last thing she expected to happen was exactly what happened next. As she was opening the lid of her trunk, whirling lights--from the direction of the water tower about a half-mile west of Sonny's.

"At first she thought she must have a brain tumor or something and she sat right down on the edge of the trunk waiting to have a fit or pass out," Frieda explained, "but she soon realized this was no dizzy spell." She folded the sweaters and reached for a bag. "Paper or plastic?"

All the nuns' lore about the sun spinning on Easter morning came back to the clerk and, even though it's Advent and not Easter, she glanced over at the setting sun, "and that's when she saw the figure sort of floating above the water tower," Frieda said.

A man had come up behind Sharon and heavily set down a cartoned microwave oven on the belt. "It sounds like the UFO John Tiedelman spotted last week when he was watching for the meteor showers," the man, a skeptic, said.

"It was the Blessed Virgin Mary," Frieda insisted. "Who else would be wearing a flowing blue veil?"

"She must have been frightened--the clerk, I mean," Sharon put in, stepping to the side to let the man scan his credit card in the machine.

"Not in the least. She says it was like running into an old friend you haven't seen for a long time, and wanting to get caught up on all that's happened."

"Where did you hear all this?" the man asked, a little rudely, Sharon thought.

"Why, it's all over the radio. They're calling her 'Our Lady of the

Tower.' Isn't that lovely? I stopped on my way in to work, but they said the clerk won't be in today. It's just like St. Bernadette. When the Blessed Mother appears to someone, it's always the last person you'd expect. They've got some great specials going on because of all this." Frieda looked at Sharon. "Do you know how to cook Jerusalem artichokes?"

Sharon decided to avoid Sonny's after all. Just last summer a farmer saw the image of Christ on the side of a freight car some forty miles outside of town and the crowds came for weeks afterward. The traffic through the little rural community had plugged up the arteries like Key Lime Pie. She'd take a green bean casserole to the swim banquet tonight. She didn't feel like getting caught up in any more crowds today. Besides, she'd gotten Superman's blessing already today. She didn't believe in this latest vision, though she believed Frieda was right: if the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to anyone in this town, it would be someone not very important, someone downright obscure--like a deli clerk from Sonny's, or a stay-at-home mother.

And she needed that assurance now because, truthfully, she was feeling more than a little unsure of herself these days.

Sharon was almost late for her appointment at the Silver Shears Salon. She was ready for a change, she'd told Stacie at her last hair cut, and Stacie had suggested a perm. Oh no, Sharon had said, remembering her last disaster, but Stacie said the new perms were nothing like the old perms. The chemicals were gentler, the results more natural. Sharon couldn't go wrong. Furthermore, Stacie said, they used a new conditioner that produced electrifying results. "It'll make your nipples hard," Stacie promised. "It's better than sex." Sharon decided that anyone willing to discuss the state of their nipples publicly must be telling the truth, so she agreed to the perm. She could pick up a Plumpy Burger on the way.

When she opened the door on the driver's side of her '78 Volkswagen Beetle, the back end of the running board broke off and fell--bam!--to the pavement. The front end of it was still attached, however, and she couldn't break it off, so she had to roll down the window and drive with one arm holding up the running board like Scarlet O'Hara hoisting the hem of her ball gown. She reminded herself of what Dick always said, "You're driving a classic, Baby! Things break on them, but that's how it is with classics."

Making the turn into Plumpy's was a little difficult with one hand on the wheel, because of a short in the wiring that made the horn blare whenever she turned the wheel to the left, but she'd take it easy, that's all. Bank tellers and fast food workers flashed her dark looks, thinking she was annoyed by slow service when they were counting change and scooping up fries as fast as they could. Sharon simply waved and smiled back, and patted the wheel of her classic car. She was concentrating so hard now on her turn that she didn't even see Dick's Lexus on Market, but he saw her.

He was on his way to lunch at the Mastiff Arms Hotel, where Marijayne was waiting in a booth banked with purple velvet and twinkle lights, surrounded by shopping bags from Hudson's and Jacobsen's. What a welcome sight she was after Sharon in her classic car.

He must have sounded annoyed when he mentioned Sharon, because Marijayne said, "Why, Dick, even if she doesn't work, Sharon deserves an occasional lunch out." She continued to study the menu, feeling magnanimous. She could afford to be generous with this other woman's husband's money. They proceeded to order a meal that cost ten--twenty times as much as Sharon's Plumpy Burger and diet Coke.

After a leisurely lunch, the lovers withdrew to a room on the third floor without bothering to take separate elevators--no one paid any attention

to them any more. For the price of the room, you might expect it not to smell like a cheap motel, but it did, and the sheets were chilly and stiff. Dick's weight didn't sit well on the turtle cheesecake--there was no room for last minute scruples, if she had any.

Waiting for him to begin kissing her was always like the first time she'd climbed the high dive at the municipal pool, twelve years old. The other kids had been doing it for years, but she'd always been afraid. Now she was ready. Or thought she was, until the moment when she reached the end of the board, and felt it bend just a bit. Looking down, she was afraid she'd wet herself in front of everyone. She'd stood there holding herself, as goose bumps tugged at the hairs of her arms, and dropped, rather than dove off, only after the waiting kids below shamed her into it. She couldn't think; she'd just responded to the voices telling her what to do. But she'd liked the sensation of rushing upside down through the humid air, and the surprise of the water, its power to slow her fall, the small fear as she kicked and flailed with racing heart and aching lungs to the surface. She'd climbed the metal ladder and raced to get back in line and do it again.

She lay under the sheets, holding her arms and shivering.

"You look about twelve years old," Dick said tenderly, and pulled back the sheet.

All she could do was grab him and hold on tight.

Meanwhile, at the Silver Shears Salon, Stacie was applying the aforementioned conditioner to Sharon's newly permed hair and scalp.

"Wow! You were right about this stuff," said Sharon.

"Told you. Who needs a man?"

"I think I'll hang onto Dick a while longer, just the same," Sharon

laughed.

Her ears felt naked, and her wet hair froze on the way home. She'd told Stacie to leave it wet--the perm had taken longer than she'd planned. A glance in the rear view mirror didn't give her the whole picture.

She went to work with the can opener and prepared the casserole, feeling her hair first thaw, then drip, then go damp. She slipped the casserole into the oven, standing over the open door for a minute to let the heat finish drying her hair. Finally she was able to look in the mirror. What she saw made her gasp in horror. Her hair, kinky and frizzled, had slurped up to within an inch of her scalp. She looked like her mother in the photo taken on her fortieth wedding anniversary. She tugged and tugged, but it was useless. She was Samson, when she'd been going for Delilah. She wanted to hide like Adam did after he got his yearly springtime buzz at the kennel. Instead, she had to put on a brave face and head out for the swim team banquet. Dick was kind--probably because he was late getting home--and said she looked fine. He rubbed his hand over her curls the way he did Adam.

Sharon tried not to inhale the heavy smells coming from the dozens of covered dishes arrayed for the swim team banquet. The scalloped potatoes that you knew from the sharp seasonings had been prepared from a box, and greasy carry-out chicken were steadily cooling to unsafe temperatures. There were several pizzas melding into their cardboard cartons, the cheese glazing over like plastic. Sharon saw Marijayne Hoffman down by the desserts removing a beautiful pie from a Tupperware carrier. The pie was edged with perfect rosettes of whipped cream and slices of kiwi.

Marijayne held up the pie for admiration. "It's Key Lime," she said,

then made space on the table for her pie by sliding a chocolate cake right into a bowl of pudding. "I don't believe it! Dick wanted *me* to make a Key Lime Pie."

"What did you make instead, I wonder?" Marijayne seemed really interested to find out. She reached over and pulled back a corner of the foil over the casserole still in Sharon's hands. Sharon was taken aback; it somehow felt like a violation of personal boundaries.

"Oh, is that the one with the mushroom soup and the greasy little onion crisps? Yum. Why don't you put it here, with the others?" There were three other green bean casseroles exactly like it. Sharon set the casserole on the table with the serving spoon on whose wooden handle she'd put a fancy H with magic marker.

"You look different. A little tired."

"Do I? I feel fine."

"You don't have a cold? Your eyes are red. I know: it's your hair!"

"It's a perm," Sharon explained, tugging at the tight little curls. "The hairdresser said it'll relax in about a week or so. Dick's swearing-in is the week between Christmas and New Year's, so it should look okay by then."

"Perms are so ... easy to take care of, I suppose. I've never had one. I've seen too many women who end up looking like poodles--oh, not you, of course."

Sharon screwed her face into a smile and folded her arms over her chest, wondering what had happened that Marijayne's friendliness didn't seem so genuine all of a sudden.

"The photo will look okay."

"What photo?"

"The one for the newspaper--when Dick takes the oath of office."

You'll have to hold the Bible, of course. Don't look so worried--you can always wear a hat." Marijayne laughed again, perhaps at the thought of Sharon in a hat.

Sharon laughed, too. She was not a hat person. "A pill box, like Jackie Kennedy," she said. "I can pick one up at Good Will."

They stared at the Jello salads. Finally, Marijayne said, "Isn't that one sweet?" She pointed to a shimmering fish concocted of two layers of Jello, blue and yellow, the swim team colors. The blue layer was cloudy with mayonnaise, while the yellow one was swimming with gummy-fish candies. A soda straw had been stuck in the fish's mouth and taped to it was a paper banner that read, "Go, Barracudas!"

They discussed the relative merits of the other Jello salads, and then, thankfully, the president of the swim team boosters began the invocation.

The Hoffmans went through the line with the Hedstroms, but Dick steered Sharon the other way to find a table. The only places that weren't taken were at a table next to the one where the twelve-fourteen-year-olds were sitting. The noise and commotion would be preferable to Marijayne's arch laugh. The kids had been the first to go through the food line and were already finished eating. They were now taking apart the balloon centerpiece, untying the balloons and taking whiffs of helium, then making each other bust up at the munchkin effect the gas had on their voices.

"Someone should make them stop," Sharon whispered to Dick.

"Why?"

"What if a balloon gets stuck in someone's windpipe?"

"They're just kids--let them have fun."

Sharon took a bite of Marijayne's pie and drew her mouth into what she knew to be the current shape of her cervix, perfectly round and firmly

closed.

"Omigod, this pie is rich. I can't eat it--and you certainly can't. Two bites and the cholesterol would finish you off. Instant heart attack."

The munchkin giggles from the next table grew suddenly more boisterous, and she saw a skinny boy at the head of the table wave his arms as if in alarm and let out a crescendo of frantic cries. At the other end of the table Eloise Hoffman suddenly stood up and, shaking her headful of glorious curls, let loose with a series of strangled whoops. Either she was answering him or they were both choking to death, and Sharon jumped to her feet, looking from one to the other, trying to decide whom to save first. In three or four giant strides she was at Eloise's side and had grabbed the girl by both shoulders, trying to remember how to do the Heimlich maneuver.

Eloise was clearly amazed. "We're just playing, Sharon!" she cried, a little shrilly, her voice still distorted by the helium. The whole table was already keyed up and this gave them one more excuse to burst into uproarious laughter. Half-annoyed but relieved, Sharon returned to her place and picked up her fork again. She disliked being called by her first name by children. It was, she thought, disrespectful. In Eloise's case, she had the feeling the disrespect was Marijayne's.

She went to take a bite of her pie, but the pie was gone and the empty plate was in front of Dick, whose eyes were shut as he worked his mouth over the last bite, then licked the plastic fork clean, tine by tine, with such thoroughness that Sharon couldn't stand it another minute. She grabbed the fork right out of his hand with such force that the head snapped right off.

She never would have thought it possible to be jealous of a fork.

The Rev. Damschroder had been listening all day to reports about the

vision on the water tower and was almost afraid to go home and have to endure the telling all over again from Trudy. But when he tentatively opened the back door, Trudy was standing at the stove in the very position she was in when he left the house this morning, stirring something in a saucepan. This morning it was oatmeal. Now it appeared to be spaghetti sauce. Maybe it was the same concoction, and it turned red after eight hours of continual stirring. She didn't look up when he came in, or seem to notice when Caesar charged in from the den, all but wetting himself in his gratitude to have another warm body in the house. The Rev. Damschroder embraced wife and dog, receiving Caesar's sodden licks and Trudy's dry little pecks with equitable grace. "'A good wife who can find?' Right here in my own humble abode, oh love of my life!" he cried.

He made no mention of the event that has rocked Vieux Chien. The phone interrupted their dinner several times, and each time it rang, Trudy dutifully jumped up to answer, and handed him the receiver. She had no curiosity about the calls or why there were so many of them. After dinner, she took up her accustomed spot by the fire and resumed her needlework, and he turned on the news. The big story of the day of course was the apparition of Our Lady of the Tower. There were interviews with Arnold Best, Mayor Davenport, public works director Todd Hock, and the bishop of the Catholic diocese.

Noticeably missing from the line-up was the deli worker who supposedly had the vision. Arnie Best kept turning the discussion to the church the lady wants built on the site, while Mayor Davenport rubbed his hands together and expressed "a heartfelt welcome to pilgrims who come to our fair city to visit the shrine." He hasn't looked this excited since the elephant race during his last campaign. Todd Hock showed street maps and

announced alternate routes for local traffic to accommodate the anticipated thousands who will pour into town to see the "holy site." The bishop got all of two minutes to argue for everyone to remain calm and to insist that "the Church is not endorsing the vision as authentic." The report concluded with shots of the faithful and the merely curious crowded outside Sonny's. Viewers were invited to watch a special interview at eleven with Frank Bowser concerning how the anticipated boost to tourism was expected impact production at the bubble gum factory.

Throughout the entire report, Trudy never once glanced up from her work or commented. Her husband turned off the set and regarded her with interest. Never has her plodding disposition seemed more appealing than now.

"What are you making there, oh pearl of great price?"

She continued to ply her needle, weaving it methodically in and out of the little square of plastic in her left hand. "Christmas trees," she replied tersely.

"Doesn't it ever get tiresome for you, my dear--all that needlework?"

"Idle hands..." she mumbled, scarcely moves her mouth. He noticed that her fingers were moving in a circular fashion very much like the stirring she was earlier engaged in.

He couldn't think what else to say, so he asked again, "What are those--Christmas trees? Yes, I see that they are."

"They were a big seller last year," said Trudy.

"Fascinating!"

"They're very versatile. Hang 'em on a tree, tie 'em on a package. Buy 'em by the yard and drape 'em on a stair rail. Safer than pine roping. Won't catch fire."

He moved to her chair and knelt, placed one hand on her knee. She glanced up, her face screwed in concentration, brown eyes beady over her reading glasses. "Trudy, dear, you daughter of Zion--wouldn't you like to try something different for once?"

"You mean balls? That's Sophie Davenport. The red balls, I mean. I don't know who makes the blue. Me, I just make trees."

He sighed heavily, fumbled for the end of the yarn and pulled out a whole string of Christmas trees to view. He counted them: one hundred and sixty-eight.

"When are you coming to bed?" He tried to get up, but his knees were stiff and he had to use both hands for leverage.

"Soon as I hit two hundred." She sounded grimly determined.

"Well, don't wait too long, dear. We're getting older by the minute."

When Dick came home from work the following evening, Sharon pulled open the refrigerator door to show him a Key Lime Pie resplendent with Cool Whip Lite and thin slices of banana that had turned black because she'd forgotten to dip them in lemon juice. She cut him a large piece.

"Shouldn't we have dinner before dessert?"

"Just tell me how you like it. And don't even mention your cholesterol, because--ta-da! It's lowfat!"

Unlike the classic recipe, that is possibly the easiest pie to prepare, this lowfat version took forty minutes to make and another twenty to wash up all the mixing bowls, saucepan, measuring cups and spoons, whisk, grater, and rolling pin required to make it.

Dick took a large bite.

"You're avoiding the banana."

"I am not."

"All right, then, tell me. What's new at the office?"

"Nothing much."

"You never tell me about your work. I don't really know what you do all day. We go to parties and all the other wives seem to know which judges are bastards. But not me. I have to fake it."

"All the judges are bastards. What else do you want to know?"

"I don't even know what to ask. What do you do all day? Whenever I call the office, they tell me you're having a swim at the YMCA."

"I'm glad Elaine is giving callers the impression that I don't do any actual work."

"I'm not a 'caller.' How can you refer to me as a 'caller?'"

He set down his fork.

"Why have you stopped eating the pie? You're bored with me, aren't you? Well, that's it. I'm going back to school."

He set down his plate. "What for?"

"It'd be nice, wouldn't it, to have a wife you could talk to? And if I had a job I could help out with expenses! Dolly will be going away to college soon, and Hunter is right behind her."

He'd never thought of it before, but now the idea struck him with the same force as the decision about which church to join. High-watt halogen light bulbs seemed to go off in his head. "It's what I've wanted all along," he said.

His response robbed her of some of the pleasure of her plan. "Why didn't you say so before?"

He shrugged, but she answered herself. "I know. You didn't want to hurt me and make me feel I've been sucking your life dry."

He started to speak, but she held up her hand. "Don't even try to deny it."

Shadows seemed to form behind him, undulating softly like candle flames. She knew who they were: the women who'd worked on the campaign, with their shoulder bags and blazers.

She went upstairs to lie on their bed and contemplate the utter failure of her life.

Later, she brought it up again to be sure he understood her plans.

"So, it's all right with you if I go back to school?"

"Yes."

"What about the kids?"

"What about them?" He shrugged and his shrug seemed to dismiss the extent of Sharon's involvement in their lives. Or maybe he meant to reassure her. Maybe he meant to get more involved with them himself. Sharon would be happier, they'd all be happier. Closer, too.

"Thank you, Dick," she said simply, because she didn't know how to express a gratitude as enormous as the one she felt. It didn't occur to her that gratitude might be unnecessary; that he did not express, nor did she expect his gratitude when he pursued his goals and interests. Grown up people, or men anyway, assumed they had the right to do so.

"Strong women can raise children and hold jobs and do it all on their own," he said.

Eleven

Sitting at the edge of a chair across from an adviser easily fifteen years her junior, Sharon clutched her purse and a list of the course offerings for Winter Quarter. "I'd like to get my degree so I can help out with expenses. College--for the kids, I mean. And retirement," she explained apologetically, as if any college bureaucrat would turn away a student who had other obligations.

"How many children do you have?"

"Four." She used to be proud of the fact, but now it felt as if she'd held Dick back, strapped him with responsibility: one baby after another that he must provide for by himself.

The girl nodded vigorously, as if agreeing that Sharon's life has been a waste. "Freshman comp," she decreed and took up her pen to put Sharon's fate in writing.

"Oh, no, I tested out of that twenty years ago."

"Can you prove it?" The tone was brusque, almost accusing.

"Yes--the papers are somewhere at home." In a cardboard box in the attic, along with her high school year book and shriveled bridal bouquet? She'll never be able to find them.

"Early childhood development."

"What? I've raised four kids--."

The girl bit the inside of her cheek as if highly amused. "It's a requirement for the elementary ed major."

"But the first adviser I talked to said I could get credit for lifetime

learning."

The girl broke into a wide smile now. "There are forms and procedures for that." She rummaged through her files and produced a thick packet. "And fees," she added.

"Besides, I haven't decided what I want to major in."

"Elementary ed is the only four-year program we offer here. You'd have to transfer to Lansing to complete another major. And you can't do that. You are what we call a 'place-bound student.'" She fixed Sharon with a look and dropped her voice ominously. Then, more cheerfully, "Now if you were divorced, I could recommend you for the displaced homemakers' program!" She offered this as if it were something Sharon might seriously consider.

"I'm not, though. Aren't there some electives I can take?" She glanced down at the sheet of course offerings in her hand. "Here--art history. No, wait. Painting!" Dick would urge her to take something more practical, but it's passion she needs in her life just now, beauty. At the very least, color. "Can I take painting?"

The girl chuckled softly and looked a little pitying. Another middle-aged woman who fancies she can regain her lost youth. It's too late to become Georgia O'Keeffe and you're too young to be Grandma Moses.

"All right, then. Art history," Sharon murmured, eager as always to placate any figure of authority. The adviser let out her breath like so much steam, wiggled her pen between black-lacquered fingers. "And cultural anthropology. And Survey of British Lit. Please."

"Don't--"

"--be greedy. I know. I'm asking too much."

"What I was going to say is, don't you think you should start out

slowly, maybe one course at a time, to see how you do?"

In the end, unable to think of a reason to refuse, the girl curtly signed the forms handed Sharon the invoice, and pointed her in the direction of the bursar's office to pay her bill.

There, Sharon used Dick's credit card to pay the tuition, and the same at the book store. Her art history textbook was a whopping \$75. Each time she pulled out the plastic, she felt beholden to him all over again.

She lay the book on the front seat so she could flip through the pages on the way home. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael: she'd grown accustomed to thinking of them as Ninja Turtles. Now she imagined having lively discussions about the Italian Renaissance with Dick as they drank their coffee after dinner. Never mind that his idea of art was the laminate wall clock shaped like the lower peninsula, with Petoskey stones instead of numerals and oars for the minute and hour hands. Titian, Martini, Tintoretto. She murmured the names over and over like a mantra, and almost hit a pick-up truck that cut her off as she was about to make a left-hand onto Jackson--horn blaring, of course, which prompted the driver of the pick-up truck to flash her his middle finger--and the Beetle skidded in slush, sending her into a snow bank, turning the car so that she found herself staring into the teeth of a steel gray Suburban.

The waitress was already serving the salads when Rev. Damschroder arrived at the Rusty Dog for the monthly lunch meeting of Churchmen for Change and Renewal. "I'll have the BLT," he told her.

"You mean the BVM? It's our new special--"

"Never mind. Change that to a cheeseburger, no pickle, no onion," the Rev. Damschroder muttered briskly.

Father Arnold Best was picking the mushrooms off his Caesar salad. The Rev. Damschroder reached over and stayed his hand. "Let's get to the point, Arnie. I want you to admit it. This nonsense about a vision: it was all your doing, wasn't it?"

"Am I one to run around claiming to see angels dancing on the end of a pin? I never claimed I saw anything. Who wants my onion?"

Beren Mercouri arrived, wearing her signature black suit dress that flattered her with long lines but did little to reduce the impact of her ample bosom. She took the empty chair between Father Best and the Rev. Paul Schrader, who greeted her with "Behold, Athena! Not a moment too soon. We could use a bit of wisdom." The two men half-rose from their seats, then sat back down, inching their chairs away from her as if to make room for that bosom.

"Why did you order a salad if you didn't want vegetables?" sputtered the Rev. Damschroder, spearing the onions from Father's salad plate and laying them on his own. "Just answer my question."

"My people have had their faith sorely tested this past year, you'll agree."

His brothers and sister in Christ murmured sympathetically.

"....Father Wirst...." .

"Ah, yes, the incident at the rest area...."

"Most unfortunate, but entirely avoidable, if you people would only allow your clergy to marry."

Father Best smiled wryly. "The last thing Father Wirst wants is a wife, Beren."

"That's just the tip of the iceberg," the Rev. Paul Schrader murmured to Beren and rattled off for her a short list of recent scandals that had plagued

Immaculate Conception Catholic Church: the sad death of the likable young Father Wozniak from AIDS, the former pastor who absconded with parish funds to become, in his own words, "a California surfer." "Tell you more later," he whispered, seeing the look Father Best was giving him.

"The last thing your parish needs is a new church building, and that's what this whole thing is about!" The Rev. Damschroder threw his napkin onto the table. Then, more composed, "I say this, of course, in Christian charity. Confession is good for the soul."

"How would you know?"

"Boys, boys." Unlike her brethren, newcomer Beren Mercouri was more amused than angry.

"How are you going to keep this up? This 'lady of the tower'--isn't she about due for another appearance?" This from the Rev. Paul Schrader.

Father Best's face remained inscrutable. "'When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, He refused to answer at all.'" Then, throwing up his hands, blurted, "All right, all right. Because it's more controversial than Wirst. It takes the heat off his legal problems and gives the parish something else to talk about."

"But it's a fraud, and you're accepting donations from innocent people--"

Father shook his head. "The bishop has stated for the record that the Church refuses to confirm that the vision is authentic. I have gone on television to say that donations are inappropriate--"

"'Inappropriate.' Oh, tough language."

"You don't deny that money is coming in?" asked the Rev. Paul Schrader.

Father Best beamed. "Hand over fist," he crowed.

"I knew it!" the Rev. Damschroder exploded, and Christian brotherhood be damned. Then, seeing he's been unsuccessful in provoking his rival, he remarked, "You seem to be taking all this rather calmly." Indeed, it seemed that the priest had the detachment of one who is not long for this world. The Rev. Damschroder felt a lurch of concern.

Father Best shrugged. "We're donating all the money coming from outside the parish to charity. As for the money being donated by parishioners, well, you can relax. There isn't going to be a new church. The parish council voted it down. There won't even be an Arnold G. Best Parish Hall. What they want to do with the money is to have the existing church air-conditioned."

The disciples ceased quarreling for the moment about which of them was greatest. Air conditioning was a safe subject, one they could discuss with some degree of objectivity, until dessert was served. Then, just as everyone was digging into hot apple pie, Father Best had to ask in a calculatedly off-hand manner, "By the way, how is the membership campaign going, Ronald?"

This remark had the effect of breaking up the party, as no one wanted to hear the priest and the Rev. Damschroder obsess about that again.

Sharon's father had bronchitis, and then pneumonia. No, he didn't have to go into the hospital, the doctor said. Then the doctor changed his diagnosis and said Frank didn't have pneumonia. It was bronchitis after all. But he couldn't come for Christmas, that was for sure.

"Then we'll come there, Dad." She heard him coughing on the other end of the phone like she'd never heard coughing before.

"No, you can't do that!" Frank was nothing, if not frank. "I'm sick. I

can't be getting ready for company."

"You don't have to do a thing, Dad. I'll make dinner and-- everything."

Frank didn't want the whole family descending on him at once.

Sharon made up her mind that she would go to her father's and that she would go alone--but she would surprise him. That way he couldn't fuss about it. She would wait until after the kids had opened gifts and after she'd served the turkey dinner and everyone was feeling mellow and content, and then she'd load up the car with Frank's gifts and head for home.

She wasn't prepared for what was waiting: the house quiet as the grave, Dad sleeping on the couch so deeply he didn't wake when she came in with her arms loaded with gifts. She could see, looking at him even with the afghan over him, that he'd lost weight. He hadn't been eating right.

Had she really expected ribbons and bows to make up for her mother's absence, to cure his cough, to entice him away from the edge?

She bought a stewing hen and made soup, and a vaporizer that she filled to the rim and aimed directly at him. Next day, she drove back home again. She'd made the drive so many times in the months since her mother died, that she was a bit confused as to where "home" was.

It would be a few more weeks before Frank was hospitalized and luckily he wouldn't linger after the stupid doctor finally diagnosed lung cancer. Sharon still had to make the trip back home to help her sisters clean out the house and put it up for sale. Of course it was hard on Dick, her being away so much. He had to be mother and father to Dolly and Hunter, while adjusting to his new role as city attorney. Sharon wasn't there to listen to his experiences, but Marijayne was.

Twelve

The Revolving Calendar in Spire Square turned a blank face to the frigid blasts and heavy cloud cover that sweep down from Canada during this bleakest of months. A record snow fall covered the letters announcing the cancellation of the only events, Mayor Davenport's panel to consider the economic uses of lake effect snow and the annual conference on Seasonal Affective Disorder. With the average number of sunny days in January at 3.6, and the average snowfall for the month well over 40 inches, what was there to discuss? Office workers stumbled through great drifts and mounds of the stuff as they past the Square and didn't bother to look up. They knew there was nothing to look forward to but Spring.

For Sharon Hedstrom, however, Spring had come early. Sloshing her way across campus to classes, she felt the sap rise in her veins. It was a whole new life, separate from her other. On campus she was neither wife, nor mother,--nor even grieving daughter. She fell in love with art history--even if Dick didn't, after all, enjoy discussing the Italian Renaissance. She fell in love with her British literature professor, tall and ascetic-looking with a drooping moustache and sloping shoulders. She was in love with her cultural anthropology professor, Dr. Helen Blankenship, a woman close to her own age, married, but with no children. She knew she should feel sorry for her, but nothing about Dr. Blankenship invited sympathy. Holy Mother Church would regard her decision not to have children as selfish. But Dr. Blankenship did not strike Sharon as selfish. Her lectures were generous with information, lively and interesting. She had a loyal following, especially

among the women. One envious colleague had dubbed her "Titania Frito-Lay" because her adoring students could never take just one of her courses; they consumed them like potato chips. Three or four vestal virgins followed her around, carrying her things, leaving her presence only to run to the library to do a bit of research at her behest, or to procure a package of Reese's peanut butter cups, the favored offering. What a picture they made: Helen Blankenship, tall, large-boned, in the bold-patterned robes of her husband's native Labatami tribe and a parka; and three or four steps behind, her downy-haired, big-eyed baby chicks.

Bringing up the rear this semester was an old bird who didn't look too long for the stewing pot.

The attachment was mutual, of course; Dr. Blankenship enjoyed the role of quasi-tribal matriarch. But her interest in her newest disciple was tinged with clinical interest. She was frankly curious about those women, the "non-traditional students," who were showing up on campus in increasing numbers: women of her own generation who'd taken the path most traveled and, now that a trail had been blazed by hardy pioneers like herself, wanted to go back and take the other path, too. There was a book in all this, she was sure, and she was taking notes. She wrote in her journal, "I despise them, pity them, and yet I know I will squat beside them and shriek right along with them, as they labor to bring forth a new life for themselves." She'd never much liked doing field work in the rain forest; her last bout with malaria was particularly nasty. Here in this remote outpost of academe, Helen Blankenship had found material that promised to bear fruit.

She was taking notes. Her first journal entry was as follows: "Two non-traditional students this semester in Women in Tribal Society: P. Bailey

and S. Hedstrom. Both married, both with children. Interesting contrast in their behavior already. S.H. very intense, hand visibly shaking when she took notes and she kept crossing out, getting things wrong, asking me to repeat--and I was only going over the syllabus. P.B. more relaxed, confident. Younger, blonde, attractive. Expect she will do better."

A few weeks into the semester, however, Dr. Blankenship was beginning to revise her opinion.

"Jan. 19: P. Bailey not in class today: called to say the fog made driving dangerous. Not so the dauntless S. Hedstrom, who stopped in to ask about the midterm. Said she drove 15 mph to campus today with her head stuck out the open window and her emergency lights blinking the whole way."

At the end of the month, she wrote: "Jan. 28: P.B. getting on my nerves: demanding, needy. Expects me to e-mail lecture notes from last Wednesday, when she missed due to child's dental appointment. Presumably S.H.'s children have teeth, too, but she manages to schedule appointments around class times. Her paper exceeded the page-limit by four pages. I scribbled remarks everywhere because she seems to crave approval. She held the paper up to the light as if she's looking for more."

Sharon scored a perfect score on the art history mid-term. She worked hard, although it didn't feel like work. She lapped up the material in her textbooks the way Hunter used to drain both breasts and howl for more. She always had a book open now, whether she was cooking or ironing. Sheer terror that she might not pass motivated her. If she could infuse her children with her own sudden love for learning, so much the better. At night she tried reading art history to Wolfe instead of the Berenstain Bears, but that

didn't go over very well. Neither did the *Hamlet* video, though she made Hannah's favorite buttered popcorn and offered her twenty bucks to watch it with her.

Dane spotted Sharon at a YMCA swim meet the last weekend of the month, sitting cross-legged on a blanket spread out on the gymnasium floor, with a hefty book open on her lap, seemingly oblivious of the half a dozen or so swimmers in the 8-and-Unders group who were sprinting and somersaulting around her. The whole gym looked like a mammoth, teenager's bedroom strewn with blankets and beach towels and shoes and littered with dozens of empty drink boxes, scores of discarded wrappers from granola bars, paper plates with broken tortilla chips and the drying remnants of nacho cheese sauce. A few families sprawled on the blankets, as if soaking up the rays from light fixtures in metal cages high up in the ceiling. Despite layers of sweaters and flannel, parents shivered, while half-naked kids in skimpy swim suits worked their hand-held electronic games or listened to music through earphones, oblivious of the draft generated by the blowers. A continual stream of traffic moved in and out as lines of swimmers danced out to the pool for their events or returned from them, dripping and breathless and wrapped in towels, or else made countless trips to the snack bar. In all this mayhem, like the quiet eye of hurricane, sat Sharon, trying to read. What could possibly be holding her attention?

Dane picked his way carefully across the gym and squatted beside her on her blanket. She went right on reading, moving her highlighting marker across the page like a scanner. Maybe she thought her pen could suck up the words and commit them to memory. Almost every sentence got highlighted. What was the point? None of the text stood out any more.

Dependable, comfortable, motherly Sharon: studious as she was trying to be, Dane thought she also looked the consummate housewife, sucking up the text with her highlighter the way she probably held the hose of her vacuum cleaner. He squatted beside her for a moment, watching in a sort of fond amusement. The title of the text appeared at the top of the page: "Good Manners, Not Adultery: Eskimo House Guests Urged to Help Themselves to Whale Blubber, Seal Skins, Wife."

Sharon was literally absorbed in the text. By the time she got to the second paragraph, the print on the page blurred, then grew transparent. She stepped inside, looked around. Snow, everywhere. Christmas wreaths, poinsettias. She and Dick standing at the front door welcoming the partners, associates, secretaries, and notable guests of Hedstrom, Withers, & Hedstrom as they arrive for the office Christmas party. Dick takes their coats and heaps them onto her outstretched arms. Winking at Chuck Upton, he orders her to "Take them upstairs and lay them on our bed. Mush!" He smacks her on the flank and chuckles. She struggles up the stairs under the weight of seal skin, suddenly aware that Chuck is following her. She can feel breath on her neck. Her arms ache, her legs refuse to move. Exhausted, she trips and falls onto the heap of coats. She smells after shave and a voice very close to her ear --

"Do you do this for fun, or are you serious about it?"

Sharon felt herself suddenly plunged back into reality like the early astronauts whose spacecraft splash-landed in the ocean. She grabbed her chest with one hand and, with the other, held up her highlighting marker like a switchblade.

Now it was Dane Hoffman's turn to be startled. Scrambling to his knees, he started to back away, muttering apologies.

Sharon laughed and, capping her highlighting pen, explained, "I have

a test on Monday."

"You're taking a class?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, as if to say, Isn't everyone? "Three classes, actually. How about you? What are you up to these days?" Then she remembered his license has been suspended, and thinking that her question has probably embarrassed him, started to apologize.

But he didn't miss a beat. "I'm going with the choir to regionals next weekend," he said. "They needed chaperones. I suppose we'll wind up sleeping on some gymnasium floor again. And after that, it's time to start planning the post-prom party. You're coming to the meeting, aren't you? We've missed you at PTA."

She rubbed her forehead to shake away a feeling something like déjà-vu. A year ago she would have been on the other side of this conversation. "Probably not, Dane." She patted the textbook, still open on her lap. "Mid-terms."

"Of course." His smile suggested that he'd expected some excuse.

"So, tell me, what are your plans? Are you going to teach?"

"Oh, I'm not going into elementary ed. I haven't decided on a major yet. I'm thinking anthropology, maybe. Of course, I'd have to go on a dig at some point...."

Dane figured she must be kidding, so he chuckled amiably.

"....But, then there's art history--although, ideally, I'd have to go to Bliss for a semester to study...."

He laughed again, but Sharon ignored him, removing a pair of goggles that landed, dripping wet, onto the blanket and handing them up to a skinny little boy. She continued. "Who knows? Maybe I could do a double major and go somewhere like Mesopotamia to study artifacts. But teach?

No, I don't think so."

All he could say was, "I see." He didn't, though. He had similar conversations with his daughters, who were constantly changing their minds about their futures. But then, they were kids—they had every right to be undecided. He got up slowly, a bit stiff in the knees. "Well, all right, I'll let you off the hook for post-prom, but I'll be calling you for the academic awards program, and I won't take no for an answer. Where's Dick today?"

"Oh, he had a meeting with a client. He'll be by later on. How about Marijayne?"

"Haven't seen her since we got here. She's probably working at the score table. Well, I won't keep you from your studies." He started picking his way back to his own square of floor-space, wondering at Sharon's apparent lapse into second childhood. He hoped she'd come out of this all right.

Sharon watched him, wondering how he could be in such denial about everything, the poor guy.

While this conversation took place, Dick and Marijayne were whiling away the long wait between events, seated at a long table near the refreshment stand and nibbling hot dogs. They wore bored expressions like any other couple who'd forfeited their Saturday to support their child's team. No one, neither swim team parents nor swimmers, seemed to notice that the two of them appeared together more often than with their respective spouses. Even Hannah and Beatrice seemed comfortable with it, so there was no longer any need to jump apart when the girls emerged from the locker room after swim practice.

"Want another hot dog?" Dick asked.

She shook her head. She looked bored.

Dick, however, found the very boredom exciting. He felt there was something stirring about the familiarity, the sharing of food, the very act of chewing and swallowing together. He ordered another hot dog and brought it back to the table.

He made her take a bite, then he took one. Pointing to his mouth, he said, "All afternoon I'll feel the rumbling of my stomach and know that your stomach is rumbling, too from the same hot dog."

She looked at him like he had lost his mind.

He was determined to make her understand. "It's true. Women cycle together, don't they? Sharon says she and Dolly have their worst fights at that time of the month. Well, I believe we can make our digestive organs work in tandem, too, with the people we're close to."

Marijayne grimaced, but laughed, too.

He continued. "My stomach, your stomach, calling to each other like--like hump-backed whales."

Of course she laughed at that.

He didn't think she'd want to hear about how he always got an erection when he kissed Sharon and tasted whatever she'd just eaten, whether it was cornbread or onion. To taste the very food she'd consumed was to literally enter into her realm of experience at a level of intimacy that struck him as more penetrating even than sex.

It was annoying, the way Sharon kept intruding into his thoughts when he was with this other woman. In a way, Dane and Sharon were always present, not only when Dick and Marijayne made love, but even in the unglamorous moments, like now. When Dick picked up the paper plates and cleaned off the crumbs from the table, when Marijayne stood by and waited, holding both their drinks, there was much of the old married couple

in their posture together. Their easy familiarity seemed hardly the manner of guilty adulterers.

They looked so normal together that Sophie Davenport did a double-taken when, moments later as they stood near the pool to watch the 100-yard IM, Dane came up from behind and wrapped both arms around Marijayne.

But Sophie's attention was quickly diverted when the gun went off and twelve beautiful young bodies, broke their statue poses and shot into the water.

Midterms were scarcely behind her when Sharon heard some troubling gossip concerning Trixie, while waiting for her appointment for her pap smear, from Veronica Peters. They both had appointments for 2:30--and so, it seemed, did another woman, whom they overheard objecting to the receptionist that "It's five minutes to three--my appointment was for 2:30!" The woman was dressed in a suit and seemed to think Dr. Steinkamp should run his office like a business, so that having an appointment actually meant something.

"She must be a new patient," Sharon whispered to Ronnie.

"Get used to it, honey," Ronnie told the woman when she resumed her seat and picked up a back issue of Time magazine. "Read something else. You want to forget about time in this place."

"I took off work for this appointment--" the woman complained, turning pages impatiently.

"Then it'll mean more to you when you finally get to see the great man." Ronnie turned back to Sharon. "So what were you saying about Trixie?"

"Just that I haven't heard from her since, oh, before Christmas. Not

since I started taking classes...." She nodded towards the hefty art history text in her lap.

Ronnie ignored the book. "Better for you that you've put some distance between the two of you," she counseled, making her voice sound mysterious. "Trixie's out. They made her quit the hotline, the crib committee, everything."

"Why?" Sharon fumbled the book, which slid from her lap.

"Corgy finally got wind of her and Pete and that was that."

"But they were just friends," Sharon moaned, rubbing her toe.

"Oh, so you have talked with Trixie, then...."

"Well, sure. I mean, we spoke a little." Why was Ronnie interrogating her like this?

"You had some concerns."

"--But Trixie assured me there was no reason....Listen, she said they used to pray the rosary together while they drove around in Pete's truck."

"And you believed that?"

Ronnie was looking at her closely. Whatever she said was going right back to Corgy and the HeartReach executive committee. Once that might have mattered, but the absurdity of making an example of Trixie Bonami was too great. Where had Ronnie picked up this mobster manner?

Sharon said, "I always gave Trixie the benefit of the doubt. She said Gus was never there for her, but I figured she'd come to her senses. She loves her kids too much to take any stupid chances."

"Yeah, well, Corgy sorta feels the same way about her kids."

Sharon swallowed. "What about Pete? Is he out, too?"

"Outta HeartReach? Nope. We need him to knock down those cribs."

In Dr. Blankenship's class they'd just finished learning about the

shunning practices of the Opokeys of Western Burma, a tribe that frowned on adultery, but rarely punished it unless it resulted in hardship for the tribe. As the society depended on its hunters, this usually meant the woman would be punished for the transgression, being buried alive up to her neck in the jungle outside the village for five days, where she sometimes died a slow and gruesome death--the sandy soil was alive with flesh-eating ants and a great many types of insects that, at eye level, seem to jibber and gape like bogeymen--if she lacked the strength to claw her way out (with a little help from her friends or lover). The man got off scot free--except that sometimes he got the proverbial spear in the back on the next hunting expedition. The people accepted that--the Opokey hunters didn't wear orange, after all, but smeared themselves with paint and camouflage. Accidents were not uncommon.

The woman in business attire suddenly tossed down her magazine and strode to the reception desk. Sharon heard her arguing with the clerk.

"Sharon, what does that mean, anyway? 'Gus was never there for her.' Any man putting in time at that bubble gum factory is plenty there for his family. You know that sugar coating that gets on everything?"

"Of course I do, Ronnie. It eats the finish off my wood furniture."

"You ever see what sugar can do to a pair of lungs? Black lung--that disease miners get? Well, white lung does the same kind of damage."

The executive-type woman marched back to her seat, and picked up her coat and her shoulder bag, clearly miffed. She announced to the waiting room in general: "He's not even in the office! She tried to tell me he'd been out on an emergency, but what do you bet he's at the country club playing racquet ball? You can reschedule your appointments. She said they won't charge the cancellation fee."

Three young women in various stages of pregnancy bellied up to the reception desk, but seven or eight other, mostly older, women remained seated and continued paging through their magazines, as placid as ruminating cows. Dr. Blankenship no doubt could identify other factors that make the women respond so differently to the way Dr. Steinkamp treated them, and would be pleased that Sharon left the office without scheduling another appointment. But not before she removed her precious feet pin and dropped it into her purse, making sure Ronnie saw her. She hated the very idea of abortion, but she figured that women ought to have the right to make some choices. And she would stand by Trixie.

She couldn't wait to let Trixie know. She first picked up Wolfe at the neighbors's, then drove out to Trixie's. She took the wrong turn into the subdivision, then got confused which of the twisting streets to take--when was she last out here?

At last she found the right street, and there was Trixie' house, comfortingly familiar. And it looked like the same old Trixie who opened the door, but hesitated before inviting them in.

"Would you mind taking off your shoes first?" she asked.

Sharon kicked off her Target specials, then pulled off Wolfes boots. "New carpet?" she asked.

"And that's not all. Come see the family room." Trixie led the way, picking up toys from the floor and fluffing pillows as you would if a stranger had just dropped by.

"You've changed everything!" Sharon cried, trying not to sound dismayed.

Not only the carpet, but the wallpaper, the coffee table, even the ceiling light fixture were different. The only familiar pieces were the couch

and the TV, but even that was now housed in an entertainment center.

"Armoire," Trixie murmured.

Time was when Trixie would've brought over carpet samples and wallpaper books to get Sharon's opinion. She would've called ten times a day, every time she changed her mind about a pattern.

Gus came in from the kitchen and very deliberately put his arm around Trixie.

"Gus--what a surprise to find you home during the day!" Sharon said awkwardly.

Wolfe climbed onto the new couch and Trixie said with elaborate patience, "Honey, why don't you go downstairs and see if Erik is there? I'll bring cookies down and you boys can have a picnic, okay?" She scooped him up like a cat and carried him out of the room.

Then, while Trixie made tea, Sharon sat at the kitchen counter. Gus took the stool next to her. He was a big guy and the stool disappeared under his bulk. Sharon had never actually spoken to him before. He seemed like a nice guy--not like the monster Trixie described. She figured he'd leave soon and then she could ask Trixie if what Ronnie had said was true; she certainly couldn't discuss Pete Corrigan in front of Gus.

Trixie served the tea in the mugs Sharon had given her for Christmas one year. As they sipped their tea, they made pleasant conversation. They caught up on all the latest doings of their kids. Gus mentioned layoffs at the factory and said he hoped his job wasn't on the line. Trixie said not to worry as she would soon finish up her nursing program and could support them for awhile. She very much enjoyed nursing and demonstrated her skill with a needle by injecting an orange with a hypodermic.

Sharon said she was taking classes, too, and Gus asked, "What are you

going for?"

"Well, to help out, you know. Get a job...."

"No, I mean what kind of program are you in?"

"Oh. Well, I'm not sure yet." Something told her Gus would laugh at her dreams of bettering women's lives in primitive societies. People often did, so she didn't often mention it.

Something was "off," for all the effort of friendliness. Maybe that was it: it felt they were all making an effort.

"We're putting in a new bathroom upstairs!" Trixie announced suddenly and Gus reached for her hand. "Want to see?"

Clearly Gus wasn't going to leave them alone to have a real conversation, and possibly Trixie had asked him not to. Sharon followed the determinedly happy couple upstairs and acted enthused as Trixie showed off their "baby."

The new bathroom was very pink and ruffled: window curtains, shower curtains, even the towels were edged in ruffles. A wallpaper border went around the room just about the pink tiles and featured boughs of flowers and bows. The toilet was by itself in a separate closet, "just like in the fine hotels," Trixie noted. Clearly this was Trixie's dream bathroom. Powder puffs and cotton balls and finger towels were artfully arranged on the marble vanity of the double sink, along with jars of creams and perfume bottles. Gus's spray-on "Sports Scent" deodorant and hair brush were relegated to one small corner, and while she pointed out all her little luxuries, Trixie pulled the plug from the outlet and wadded up the cord, then tossed his shaver into a cabinet under the sink. The tawdry star of the whole production was the heart-shaped jacuzzi—pink, of course. Trixie stood aside to show it off, pulling Gus by the shirt to step aside, too. He tripped, and for

a second Sharon was afraid he'd fall into the tub. There wasn't much room for poor Gus, who looked as uncomfortable as the dancing hippo in one of Hannah's old picture books, forced to wear a pink tutu like all the other dancers.

She was relieved when the boys started fighting in the basement and she had an excuse to go. She might never find out the truth about Trixie and Pete. If it was an affair and if Gus knew, he was willing to pay any cost to patch up his marriage. Trixie might prickle at the disgrace her former HeartReach cronies heaped upon her, but she would find solace in her save-the-marriage bathroom and her tacky heart-shaped hot tub.

When she heard the story, Dr. Blankenship was pleased with Sharon's application of the social principles of the Opokeys to HeartReach, but gently pointed out that she had overlooked one very obvious concept at work in the situation, that of the scapegoat.

Sharon assumed she meant Trixie, who'd been kicked out of HeartReach, but Helen Blankenship gave her a rueful look and said gently, "No, I mean you. You were the price of your friend's affair."

Thirteen

Cloud cover over the Great Lakes basin during winter turns the region into a sort of gigantic petri dish in which all manner of bacteria and viruses flourish. School attendance plummets as Vieux Chien is besieged by bronchitis, flu, rotovirus, ear infection, strep throat, and even chicken pox.

Meanwhile, the Never-ending Calendar in Spire Square announces such festivities as free cholesterol screening and low-fat cooking demos, and Valentine's Day promotions at the mall, including a kissing booth with local celebrities like Mayor Gil Davenport and Vera Krause.

Every store in the mall bought full-page ads for their "unique gift ideas" but Marijayne Hoffman was out of ideas of how to make these fantasies real. From pillows to diamond necklaces to cemetery headstones, it was hearts everywhere. She swore that the very sky glowed red over the mall. One snowy afternoon, she found herself at the V.C. campus to pick up ads for the new e-commerce specialist diploma program. Naturally, she stopped in at the book store. The bookstore catered to all the needs of the students. Besides textbooks and notebooks, they could pick up medicine for their stuffy noses and candy bars to munch on when, alone in their dorm rooms they needed a little self-administered mothering. There were condoms and Alka Seltzer for those times when they felt more adult.

They were students of life as well as of elementary education or accountancy, and the book store carried a variety of supplies for those who were doing field work in love. Marijayne wandered over to the greeting cards and browsed the racks along with other, younger women, all of them

searching for the verse which will give expression to their inarticulate longings. She was not disappointed. Almost immediately she found a beautiful card printed on textured ivory paper, with elegant letters enwreathed with creamy roses that read:

TODAY,

the tender leaves of hope. . .

Inside, came the punch line:

TOMORROW,

blossoms.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes. It was perfect. She would buy it. Oh, but then this card caught her eye:

Eat a healthy diet.

Exercise regularly.

Get plenty of rest.

(I have big plans for your body.)

This card was perfect, too. Which card should she choose? The first was exquisite, dignified, elegant--and the sender stood to share a bit of reflected glory with the bard. The sentiment was suitably vague: Someone else might suggest that, under the circumstances, "Tender leaves of hope" was only a euphemism for "adultery," and that "blossoms" could mean the break-up of two families. But she couldn't help what other people thought. *Hope* was what Marijayne was all about. The second card was more direct: no euphemisms here. But the naughtiness was offset by wholesome, maternal advice.

The card she sent would represent her very self. How did she wish to appear in Dick's eyes when he opened the envelope? As an ethereal soul with exquisite taste and a certain reticence to express deep passion? Or as a red-blooded female fully aware of the needs of her body, yet possessed of a playful sense of humor and a good heart? As a good girl or a naughty one? It was the classic psychological dilemma.

When faced with tough choices, Marijayne preferred to delay a decision and to prolong the pleasure. The pecan pie or the cheesecake? The boiled wool sweater in eggplant or sage? For two years she'd collected samples for kitchen counter tops and flooring, making up her mind and then changing it again six times before she was done. It was like getting half a dozen new kitchens instead of one. She was doing it now with Dane and Dick, sampling one and the other as if they were ice cream flavors. She stood before the card rack, staring at one card and then the other. Glancing up, she saw Sharon Hedstrom hanging up the pay phone.

Sharon had just come from her British lit class, where they'd learned the history of the sonnet. Who knew this morning when she opened her eyes to pitch darkness and another snow advisory that a concept like the "Petrarchan lover" was waiting for her? She had to call Dick and tell him about it. She ducked into the book store between classes to call him. Of course he wasn't in the office, he was having a swim at the YMCA, so she left a message on his machine. But the tape cut off before she'd finished explaining the rhyme scheme of the Italian sonnet. She didn't even get to the Petrarchan lover and his abject devotion in the face of the woman's cruelty, the hopelessness of his love.

Hanging up the receiver, an idea of piercing brilliance came to her: she would write Dick a sonnet cycle for Valentine's day. College was like—a box

of Godiva chocolates--and she had Dick to thank for it. He was, after all, paying her tuition. She would express her love and gratitude by writing him an entire sonnet cycle. Thomas Wyatt made it seem simple enough. Of course she didn't have time to write a hundred fifty-four sonnets like Shakespeare did. Ten, perhaps. Well, maybe five. As she debated between a legal tablet and a spiral notebook, she glanced up and saw Marijayne Hoffman. She hadn't seen Marijayne to really talk to since the swim banquet in December when she'd seemed so strange. But now she looked glad to see Sharon and wanted her opinion.

"You can help me decide--which of these Valentines should I get?" she asked.

Sharon looked them over. Fresh from her poetry class, she was inclined to say the Shakespeare, but, "it's a bit impersonal, if you ask me. Generic, even. It could mean anything. The other one is cute, but maybe a little too... coy. I don't know. I wouldn't buy either of them for Dick, but then these are for Dane, of course, and you know him better than I do." She handed back the cards.

Marijayne waited until Sharon had paid for her purchases and left before heading for the check out with both cards. If Sharon thought the cards were all wrong, they must both be exactly right. After all, Sharon didn't seem to know what Dick wanted these days.

Sharon, meanwhile, was having problems with her sonnet cycle. She'd never written anything longer than a limerick--in fifth grade. She set a more realistic goal: a single, perfect sonnet--that was surely as romantic as a single red rose. But even with the pressure off, the project taxed her powers. It wasn't only the form that was giving her trouble, but the words eluded her.

She consulted her poetry professor, who suggested freewriting, plying the pen to paper and scribbling whatever came to mind. He kept mentioning Peter Elbow and waving his own awkwardly about.

"Turn off the inner critic and let yourself go. Your unconscious mind will turn out some ideas worth developing," he promised.

She tried it over the weekend, sitting down at the kitchen table, Elizabeth Barrett in fleece warm up pants and a ponytail. At first the pen wouldn't move at all, but gradually it began to wobble across the first blue line of her legal pad like a kid on her first pair of skates. Then suddenly the pen shot ahead. It was out of control. It sprayed a volley of single-syllable words that hit the page like machine gun fire. Even with both hands around the barrel, she couldn't control her metaphors. Her meter rumbled like mounted artillery, cumbersome with consonance, then without warning took off like a B-57 and swooped from iamb to anapest, bumped along on internal rhyme. In short, the sonnet bombed, and when she threw down her pen, she could almost see a mushroom cloud rising from the table. It was no use.

It hadn't helped that she and Dick had had words that morning, but the anger, the resentment--these were not what she wished to record. How had Elizabeth Barrett written forty-four sonnets to Robert Browning before they even married? Maybe that was the secret: writing the sonnets before you'd lived with the guy. She burned the sonnet at the stove, turned on the exhaust fan to clear the air, then sat back down and wrote a simple love note in a language and style that seemed much more her own: ordinary prose. She didn't lie, didn't sugar-coat anything the way the dust from the bubble gum factory did. She knew that sugar corroded metal and ate the finish off the wood furniture. "My love," she wrote, "is an act of faith, strongest when it disappears behind the clouds and I have only my trust that it will show

itself again, more beautiful for its changing face." It was better than writing a lot of bullshit, and safer than what she'd burned at the stove.

She tucked the note into a round of Dick's favorite kalamati olive bread from his sisters' bakery and gave it to him along with ten dress shirts, professionally cleaned and pressed, which made the clothes rack in their closet look like the men's department at Rinky Dink's. Her own clothes, two jumpers, the dress she'd bought during the campaign, and a couple of blouses, were flattened against the back of the closet. He seemed pleased with the bread and the shirts, but didn't see the note inside the bread bag. Well, that could wait.

His gift to her was a restaurant meal--a rare treat--at a little place in nearby Homer that a client had recently opened. The Silver Slipper sounded like a Wild West saloon. Its decor actually resembled that of a diner, or the sort of establishment called "EATS." The menu, however, aspired to that of a fine restaurant. Jarrod, the client-turned-restaurateur, personally presented each lady with a rubbery long-stemmed red rose and with elaborate courtesy helped Sharon to her vinyl and chrome dinette chair. The waiter was pleasant and attentive, the food heavy, but better than typical restaurant fare, though Dick remarked that it didn't hold a candle to the food at the Mastiff Arms Hotel.

Jarrod whisked away the check and announced that their meal was on the house. She wondered what kind of legal trouble Dick had helped Jarrod with that was worth such a show of appreciation. On the drive home, Dick told her.

"Rape."

"You took me to a Valentine's dinner at a restaurant run by a convicted rapist?"

"The conviction was overturned, Sharon."

She rolled down her window and tossed the rubbery rose out into the cold night.

"What did you do that for?"

"I do not accept roses from rapists, convicted or otherwise. Some Valentine. You didn't even pay for the meal."

He informed her that her gift to him was downright tacky: taking his shirts to the cleaner, rather than doing them herself.

"What difference does it make? You've got a closet full of clean shirts." She accused him of being picky.

Dick allowed that it people paid him to be picky, to consider the seemingly inconsequential angles that sometimes meant the difference between a settlement and a windfall.

She wouldn't let him lead her down any legal labyrinths, and merely protested that she had only been trying not to be so passive aggressive.

"You didn't even mention the bread!"

"My sisters baked that."

"But--." She stopped. She wouldn't mention the note. He'd find it later and then he'd be ready to make up. She could wait. This of those times when her love was indeed an act of faith.

He pulled into the driveway and waited for her to get out of the car. Marijayne's birthday was in three days and he'd promised himself to tell Sharon by then that he wanted a divorce. He'd been pitying her, planning out of sheer kindness to give her one last glorious night in bed, to generate enough fire to cast a lingering glow far into the long, cold years ahead. But she didn't deserve it.

Sharon, surprised, watched him back the car down the drive and leave.

She went inside, and picked up the card he'd given her and read it again.

"Happy Valentine's Day to a Loving Wife."

It was true: she was a loving wife. She wished it was worded differently: "...From a Loving Husband" would be nice.

Then all at once, she saw that the card didn't say "Loving Wife" at all, but "Loving Aunt."

"Happy Valentine's Day to a Loving Aunt."

She'd misread it, seen only what she'd wanted to see. What else was she misreading in this marriage?

Dick drove away like a man with a purpose, but after driving several blocks, he had to admit he had none. He could drive past the Hoffman house and torment himself with fantasies of Dane putting his hands on Marijayne. He'd tried to make her promise not to let Dane make love to her any more, but she said how could she make such promises--Dane was her husband, after all.

He could go to the Y and run around the indoor tack, but glancing at his watch, he saw that it was after nine; the Y would be closed. He could go to the office and do some work, or go to The Office and have a couple of drinks--but the thought of doing either was pathetic. He went home.

Sharon was already in bed, her eyes closed, but her lids flickering as if she were pretending to be asleep. Her shoulders were bare and he knew she was naked under the covers. The light was on next to the bed and he saw the note she'd written and placed on his pillow. The paper shiny with spots of grease and smelled faintly yeasty. He read the note hastily, the whole while imagining how warm her bare flesh would feel, how sweet, and finally he reached under the comforter and cupped her breast with his hand, miserably

grateful that Marijayne had extracted no promises that he couldn't keep.

"I'm such a fool," he sobbed miserably.

Three days later, calmer if not exactly rational, he told her he wanted a divorce. He was careful not to look at her when he said it, that way he could keep his mind focused on Marijayne, whose birthday gift was taking this first painful step toward realizing their dream.

They'd each said it before, one or the other, Sharon or Dick, as if trying the words on for size, but always in the heat of an argument. But they weren't arguing this time. They were drinking cappuccino into which Dick had stirred a little Bailey's Irish Cream.

Maybe if she hadn't accepted the statement, if she'd ignored it or brushed it aside, things would have ended differently. Maybe it wasn't that this time he was different, but that this time she legitimized it. This time things were set in motion. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Fourteen

Dick's bald announcement had the power to launch Sharon beyond the reach of the Never-Ending Calendar in Spire Square. Sharon was outside of time and cut off from the comforts of community. The isolation surprised her the most, because what she had expected was an outburst of moral outrage from all quarters. Hadn't she honored the institutions--family, church, government, neighborhood--on which society stands? To what end, if not to find their support in her time of need?

Would he be doing this at all if his mother were still alive--and her parents? Oh, what her father would say to him now! Delbert, however, who'd ruled the Hedstrom roost like the chieftain of an ancient clan, exacting compliance to his iron will from Sharon as much as from his own flesh and blood, seemed suddenly to have lost his roar. Standing in her living room, hat in hand, he kept saying, "I feel terrible, just terrible. I feel as bad as if it were happening to Bliss and me."

Then he went home and told Dick that, if he needed a place to stay, he could move back in with him.

He ate dinner with Sharon and the kids on Monday, Wednesday, and Sunday, and the rest of that week he ate at home with Dick. But it made him uncomfortable, as if he were acting as a sort of double agent. When he was at Sharon's, he felt disloyal to Dick; when at home with Dick he felt disloyal to Sharon.

The following Monday, he resolved the quandary by eating out. Delbert loved Mexican food, and with his stomach already in knots, what did

a little indigestion matter? He went through the drive-through of The Hot Tamale and ordered a bean burrito and a side of chili. "I'd like that chili extra spicy," he said. Then he pulled his Mercedes around to the pick-up window.

Later, Verna Polanski would recall that she could barely see his head over the steering wheel, but she recognized a Mercedes when she saw one. She turned up the charm, leaned out the window with its rounded Spanish arch, and said, "Hey, mister, you like the chili hot? How hot do you like it?"

Delbert looked up and saw the lines of her body through the translucent gauze blouse. She looked sturdy, and at this time of life Delbert needed sturdy. She was forty if she was a day--a mere slip of a girl. And she was flirting with him.

"I like it steamy hot," he said.

"Why not try my enchiladas? They'll make the steam pour out of your ears."

Delbert grinned and pushed the balooga horn on the steering wheel.

Verna laughed. "Why don't you come inside? If you don't like my enchiladas, they're on the house."

He liked her sense of humor, and the enchiladas, very much. Back home, later, he followed his supper with two bottles of beer and then fell asleep in his chair in front of the television, until around ten o'clock, when the heartburn woke him. He telephoned Margaret in a panic, and she came over to dose him with Maalox and read him The Wall Street Journal until he fell back asleep.

In short, Delbert decided that he had better look out for himself.

Sharon hoped that Dick's sisters might reassert some of their legendary girlhood power over their brother and crack the mouse prince in

the head with the nutcracker, maybe, or knead him into submission like so much bread dough. But when weeks passed and she heard nothing, she wondered if they thought she deserved this comeuppance--as if she'd struggled to keep her marriage intact just to show them up. They'd built an empire out of bread, expanding the business into Indiana and Wisconsin, but neither had been able to hold onto their husbands.

As for her friends, well, Sharon hadn't heard from Trixie since the day she'd been dazzled by her display of the spoils of adultery. No doubt her housework kept her busy, now that she had that extra bathroom.

Gil Davenport offered to get up a posse to hog tie and bring Dick home on a spit, then seemed surprised when Sharon's face lit up as if she actually expected him to do it. He apparently ordered Sophie to delete Sharon's name from the Rolodex: only Dick was invited to the annual cocktail party. The wheels of government turned without her. Her role in the political arena ended when she'd held the Bible during Dick's swearing in. Without Dick she was a mere tax payer. Contributions to any political campaigns had been made in both their names, but were drawn on his account. In short, he got custody of their political friends.

Chuck Upton dropped by now and then to see how she was, always with some pretext. She kept him standing in the door and didn't invite him in. The one friend who seemed genuinely concerned for her, and it embarrassed her too much to let him see how deeply she'd been humiliated.

Surely the Church would come to her aid: that Catholic Church that would hold her to her vows--rub her nose in her failure--until death. But no. When the Rev. Arnold Best heard that Sharon's husband had walked out, he said, "Cheryl who?" The Good Shepherd knows His sheep and seeks out the one that wanders away from the other ninety-nine, but the odds aren't good

when the flock is as big as Last Shall Be First Parish.

Friends and acquaintances turned their grocery carts 180 degrees at Sonny's Friendly Market, as if they'd suddenly remembered an item in another aisle.

She couldn't bear to go to church now and be seen.

Coming down from the stands following the first track meet in March, she came face to face with Marijayne Hoffman. For a few seconds, Marijayne's eyes darted about as she seemed to size up her chances of escape. Then she appeared to accept there was no graceful way out and smiled nervously, bleating a lame "Hello." Sharon felt her embarrassment, but yearned for something like normalcy in her life, so she said with forced cheerfulness, "It's going to be an early spring, don't you think?" She trotted beside her one-time friend, determined to keep up, but Marijayne seemed just as determined to ditch her. After awhile, Sharon let her go, figuring that Marijayne was afraid of contagion, worried that she'd catch whatever it was that had infected the Hedstroms' marriage and take it home to Dane.

Dick arrived, late by three hours for the track meet. Seeing the two women whose lives he was making so miserable, he ducked behind the stands and ran into Hunter, in his track suit.

"Dad! You made it!" His son said, genuinely pleased.

Dick clapped his arm around his son's bony shoulders.

Someone ought to record this moment that crystallizes what's best about America. Where was Norman Rockwell when you needed him?

As more time passed, Sharon found herself even more isolated, but didn't understand it was partly her own doing. Wherever she went, she moved like a storm cloud: a self-contained low-pressure system--and who

knew whether she'd drench you with tears or sweep you away with the force of her fury? Who but a professional storm chaser would chance a close encounter and risk having their head knocked in by flying debris? Lucky for Sharon, there was one person of her acquaintance willing to take the risk, and that was Miranda Fitz.

Randi was a dancer turned therapist who, along with her husband, Dil, were Democrats and supporters of Dick's. She just happened to telephone Sharon to invite her and Dick for dinner, of all things, shortly after the separation.

Over the years, Sharon had developed a repertoire of graceful social excuses, but all she could manage to blurt out now was the bald truth. "We'd love to, Randi, but I'm afraid we can't. Dick's moved out."

No hostess expects such an answer to a dinner invitation. Randi gasped, then cried urgently, "Sharon, don't move! I'll be right over!"

Randi worked for the Department of Mental Health, counseling women in the Displaced Homemakers Program: women like Sharon, middle-aged, many of them with no work experience, deserted by husbands, and with few prospects but the glue factory. There was no mistaking the urgency in Randi's voice. Sharon must be in imminent danger. She did as she was told. She literally stood by the phone with the receiver in her hand, afraid to put it down, until the front door opened and Randi rushed in carrying a bottle of white wine.

"I had to be with you," she explained, breathless.

Sharon allowed Randi to lead her to a chair at the table and watched as she got down wine glasses from the cupboard. She could cry now that someone had come to rescue her. She took an Oreo from a half-empty package on the table and watched Randi open the wine. Clearly she didn't

have much experience using a corkscrew, because she ended up breaking the cork and having to jab it down into the bottle. She poured out the wine and Sharon was picking out cork crumbs when Randi blurted, "You see, I want to leave Dil!" Randi took a sip of her wine and pulled her chair closer, hunkering down for some girl talk. It felt a little like high school. Sharon wasn't in the mood for sharing confidences. Dick occasionally came over to see about things. Last week he'd changed the furnace filter; this weekend, he promised to repair the dryer. She still entertained the delusion that he'd suffered a temporary lapse in sanity and would eventually come home. At any rate, to talk about the separation would make it real.

Randi didn't notice her reluctance, but began reciting a litany of complaints concerning Dil: his insufficiencies as a human being, his inadequacies as a husband. Sharon nodded and murmured sympathetically, all the while wishing Randi would leave. She used to have a list like that about Dick, too. It was surprising how quickly it had evaporated. In the blink of an eye Dick had turned the tables, so that now all she could do was wonder at the enormity of her own failings. Hearing Randi's complaints, she recognized her old attitude towards Dick of noblesse oblige, the air of condescension by which she made it clear he didn't deserve her.

She felt her throat tighten with resentment. She'd never much cared for Dil: he was too much the aging hippie who'd crossed over from being cool to being pathetic. But all at once she was on his side. "Maybe Dil is unhappy, too," she managed to say in a normal voice, though her heart was pounding.

Randi looked at Sharon, leaning back in her chair to reassert the distance between them and the fact that they were coming from opposite positions.

"I know people must think that because he was the one to leave, Dick was the only one with complaints. But that's not true. I often thought about leaving Dick, if you want to know the truth."

Randi considered this. "I've been thinking about this for years," she said, and again Sharon recognized herself in the tone that suggested great personal sacrifice and suffering. A wave of desolation rolled over her. She bit into a cookie. "I wish my mother were alive. I need to talk to her," she whispered, close to tears. "And Dad. My Dad would punch Dick's lights out if he knew."

"Haven't you told him? Where is your father?"

"He's de-e-ad!" Sharon cried and her face buckled. A thread of chocolatey drool ran from the corner of her mouth as she burst into sobs.

"My God, Sharon..." Randi said, and she sounded both alarmed and annoyed. "Here." She handed Sharon a napkin from the sunflower holder on the table.

Sharon wiped her nose on her sleeve. "He'll be back by the weekend. In the meantime, we're living it up. Last night I made mashed potatoes with real cream--and butter! I stayed up to watch Letterman and left the furnace on all night."

"Oh, that'll show him," Randi said sarcastically. "Sharon, you're not a kid whose parents have gone away for the weekend. I might expect Dolly to do those things, or Hannah, maybe! But not you. You're the adult. The kids need you to act like one."

Sharon slouched in her chair, hiccuping. "Oh, the kids are fine. No, really. We played Monopoly last night." She pulled another Oreo apart and began licking the cream filling.

Randi reached out and took the cookie away. "You know, Sharon,

maybe Dick is just seeking higher ground."

"Higher ground? Higher ground?" She seemed to snap out of something and Randi smiled.

"Where is Dick staying, by the way?"

"He's at his dad's. It's only three blocks from here. The kids are there right now."

"His father let him come home? Whose side is he on, anyway?"

Randi came over almost every night and dragged Sharon out for a walk. Most nights, Sharon let herself be dragged. On a few occasions, when she was home alone and able to avoid answering the door, she flipped off the lights in whatever room she was in and, pressing herself against the wall, edged herself to a position near the window where she could see Randi at the door and wait for her to give up and go away. Adam would bark joyously at first and look at her expectantly, and when she didn't respond, he'd snort and shake his head, as if to say, "Humans. Go figure." She wished Randi would leave her alone. Walking didn't do any good. She hated pretending with Randi to be cheerful, to be sane, well-adjusted--or at least normal.

At the same time, she really believed she was giving a convincing performance in front of the children as a cheerful, sane, well-adjusted and fully-functioning parent. But if that were the case, why did their birthday gifts to her consist of various kinds of "stress relievers": bubble bath, an electric heating pad, a device made of wooden beads that you rolled over your shoulders to release tension? Maybe she wasn't fooling any of them. And what about their stress? Dick would have sworn they were handling the impending divorce well. Sure, he'd moved out--but he'd hardly abandoned them. He dropped by to check on things and would always graciously accept Sharon's offering of homemade pie. He made a great display of wanting

them to spend time with him on the weekends. Oh, yes, Dick was sure the kids were just fine.

Within two weeks of having met her, Delbert announced his engagement to Verna Polanski. He'd proposed after their third date, but she held out for a prenuptial agreement and the negotiations took longer than he'd anticipated. Her sons kept urging her to hold out for a better settlement. Finally the terms were settled and Delbert made his joyful announcement to the family.

Dick blanched at the news. His sisters turned green.

Dick accused him of contracting a marriage of convenience.

"Well, your separation from Sharon is an inconvenience--to me!"

Delbert told him.

When Delbert told Sharon the news, she tried to be pleased, although she'd been hoping Delbert might take other tactics to secure his regular place at her table. Apparently she'd overestimated the appeal of her roast pork dinners. Poor Delbert. He'd watched Bliss decline into infantile dependency and had paid dearly for her home care. The thought of ending up like her, but with no one to find him when he fell down the stairs or suffered a heart attack, terrified him. He would have been surprised to know that Sharon had similar fears about her own future.

The engagement was as brief as the courtship, and the honeymoon shorter still because the groom suffered a painful flare-up of shingles. Verna took it all with good grace. She hadn't really wanted to go to Mexico anyway, she said. "I work there, for crying out loud!"

The newlyweds returned to the family home on Stately, where Dick and his sisters used to practice *The Nutcracker*. The house needed a lot of

work: no painting had been done since before Bliss got sick ten years ago; while so much dirt had been waxed over the vinyl tile in the kitchen that Verna thought the floor was supposed to be earth-toned.

Her first project was to paper over the family tree that Bliss had painted on the wall above the landing on the front stairway. Every member of the family was represented by an apple bearing their name. In ten minutes, Verna managed to wipe out fifty-three years of family history. When the Tommy and Eddie keened in impotent rage, Verna observed that, what with all the divorces and deaths in the family, by all rights half the apples should have rotted and fallen off the tree, anyway.

A new dawn had risen in the Hedstrom family, symbolized by the sunflower motif Verna chose for her decorating scheme.

Fifteen

Sharon was sustained by the recurrent rhythms of daily life that required her to serve meals, do laundry, and get the kids to school and activities. But especially she found comfort in the monotonous grind of the academic calendar: classes, assignments, papers, exams. Dr. Blankenship invited her anthropology students to her apartment for a small party to celebrate the spring planting, Labatami-style. Normally she extended the invitation only to students in her graduate seminar, who were over twenty-one and less likely to either twitter or gasp at the sacred horn. But in order to include her non-traditional students, her special protégés and research subjects, she invited Sharon's class as well.

Sharon hardly felt like celebrating just now. But her grade depended on her attendance--and she'd begged off a gathering to drink menstrual blood with the girls earlier in the semester--so she accepted the invitation.

"Mr. Dr. Blankenship," as his wife introduced him, looked oddly familiar.

"I think we've met," she murmured, trying to think where or when.

Dr. Blankenship laughed. "I'm glad that someone in this class is acquainted with at least the cover of the textbook!"

Mr. Dr. Blankenship smiled broadly and said, "Most people don't recognize me with clothes on." And his wife added, "That's because most people who see the photo don't look at your face."

Sharon directed her gaze at the floor and muttered that she would just go and join the others, who were sitting on grass mats on the floor.

The apartment was filled with furniture and objects that represented the meeting of two minds, two worlds, or maybe the contents of Grandmothers' attics, when one Grandmother lived in Boston and the other in a thatched hut. The focal point might be either the harpsichord in front of the wide picture window, or else the imposing olive wood totem in the corner. Match stick blinds at the windows were paired with heavy velvet panels; a painting of a Victorian lady holding a lap dog was flanked by long wooden spears. The students were subdued and Dr. Blankenship told her husband to serve "the libation" to loosen them up.

Mr. Dr. Blankenship entered wearing a loose linen robe. His skin gleamed with olive oil and bits of dried herbs that made him smell like salad dressing. A crown made of corn husks framed his magnificent head like sunrays and when he walked the shells of an elaborate breast plate clicked pleasantly. The students knew that, of course, he represented the Labatami incarnation of the grain god. While Dr. Blankenship plucked a stringed instrument and chanted seductively, he worked the room like any good host, serving drinks and what he called "hors d'oeuvres."

"Ritual dishes." Dr. B. corrected him. "The dishes are imbued with great power, but must be eaten in the prescribed sequence," she added.

"Ah, yes. Potent stuff," he said, winking at Sharon and holding out a platter of corn husks filled with a sort of steamed dumpling. "You'll like it--it's like a tamale," he added, but as he leaned over his robe fell open and the gleaming tip of the sacred horn protruded from the garment, which was disconcerting to say the least. When he stood back up, the sacred horn swung forward like a scythe. It was a good three feet in length.

While they dipped their dumplings into a concoction that looked like pineapple cottage cheese, he ladled a milky liquid into coconut shells and

passed these around, to the students' delight, though Sharon wondered if they'd gotten them at Rent-All Mart. The drink, which he kept calling a "libation" tasted like an ordinary pina colada. Next came mashed mango studded with chopped dates, chunks of fresh pineapple and spears of unripe plantain.

"Finger food, Labatami-style," joked their genial host.

And the whole time, the sacred horn played peek-a-boo from inside the folds of the robe. For a while, no one knew where to look. They hunched their shoulders to avoid contact with it and kept their hands busy with their food. They discussed the dance which would culminate the night's celebration, using dry language like seasoned academics to describe what Dr. Blankenship had called "a frenzy of frank penis worship," and she chuckled now at their Western inhibition. The more determinedly they ignored the thrusting appendage, the more deliberately Mr. Dr. B. made it swing, knocking over a glass of water and, once, catching it in someone's dangling bracelet.

"Ladies, ladies--did I fail to mention that it's insulting not to show appreciation for the sacred horn? While the other rites of the Labatami tribe are celebrations of the goddess, the rites of spring are a sort of token recognition of the male. Let's have a little more of the libation, shall we, to get us into the mood?"

The main course was sausage, gritty with caraway and anise seed and a liberal portion of the same herbs smeared on Mr. Dr. Blankenship's skin. The sausage was held in the right hand while, in the left, one held a cob of corn. The ritual required each diner to take alternate bites of sausage and corn followed by liberal gulps of the libation.

Following the main course came the teeth-picking service in which a

new broom was passed around the circle and every person drew a straw with which to remove particles of food from inconvenient places in the mouth.

It was time for the ritual dance.

First shrugging off his robe, Mr. Dr. Blankenship plugged a cord into a wall outlet, and water bubbled up from a fountain concealed in the rocks of an elaborate display of rocks and ferns. The students, feeling the effects now of the libation, giggled and clapped at the spectacle. Professor Blankenship distributed passion fruit popsicles and they all sat on their haunches on the straw mats, their feet splayed for balance.

"Like this," Dr. B. said, and showed them how to apply their tongues to their pops, and all were amazed at the agility they possessed with that organ now; loudly they licked, lapped, and sucked. Someone moaned, and a young man near Sharon gave the mating call of the double-billed whooping crane. When finished, their mouths were ringed with purple; juice dripped from their chins. Some of them couldn't keep their tongues in their mouths. They tossed their popsicle sticks onto the fire that blazed in the fireplace behind like so many gnawed mammoth bones. And the whole time, Mr. Dr. Blankenship whirled about the outside of the circle, his firm, beautiful body gleaming with sweat and oil.

Dr. Blankenship vocalized a tune without words--none were needed--and one by one the others joined in until the room trembled with the primordial utterance of the race, more expressive than language. Everything they'd read in poetry class all semester was a poor echo of this communal sound. Every poet tried in vain to refine the language and make it say, when what they really needed to do was to give up language and just utter.

They wept for the beauty of his body. One by one the other men rose,

shucked off their jeans, and joined in the dance in boxers or briefs. But when some of the women started to get up, too, Professor Blankenship motioned for them to remain seated. "You'll get your chance come May," she promised. They rocked from side to side and twined their arms, hugging each other, then stood and circled the men, until the walls whirled around them.

Sharon felt herself rooted to a female line that went back to Eve. She was one with the Mother. She was the Goddess. Sobbing, she fell to the mat and drank the dregs of the libation in her coconut shell, then pulled off her shoe and sucked her toes. Nothing could slake her longing.

She was having an orgasm of the soul.

All of this seemed much more profound while still under the influence of the libation. By morning, she felt a little ashamed, horribly hung over, and afraid of what she might have done the night before that she couldn't remember. Sexuality had never felt like power to her before. She'd always felt at its power. Men had bodies, too, and sex; yet a woman's body was always considered to be the locus of sexuality, celebrated but also reviled for it revered for it and loathed for it, and deserved neither—not for the mere accident of anatomy. Girls were taught to respect their bodies by people who clearly hated them. It was like the admonishment to love your enemy. If a body deserved respect, if someone deserved love, why did you have to be told to feel it? Wouldn't you just feel it? Sex meant being at the mercy of a power she had always identified as masculine. Until last night, when she'd been invited to observe the male, dancing and strutting, and even though it was called penis worship, she'd felt the power of being female.

Sixteen

Poor Dick. Living with Delbert was almost more irksome than living with Sharon. Delbert's digestion process was noisier than the plumbing at the office. And his insomnia proved to be contagious, even though their bedrooms were on opposite ends of the house. He belched like a furnace, yawned and sighed, and cursed softly when sleep eluded him. When they managed finally to doze off, both men moaned in their sleep, troubled by dreams brought on by spicy food and red, hot love--and woke each other up with the noise. But it would end soon enough, for Delbert's wedding date was fast approaching. Dick needed to make other living arrangements. And so Dick bought a house.

The way he found the house was this: he stepped onto Delbert's front porch to look for the newspaper and, when he saw that it hadn't been delivered, ran after the carrier who was pedaling her bike down the neighbor's drive. Dick huffed and puffed to run the short distance to the next house, and had to stop to catch his breath, leaning on a sign stuck into the yard. The sign said "For Sale." He looked up at the house and knew at once that he wanted it.

The owners accepted his offer without hesitation, and no wonder: he offered exactly the amount they were asking. There was no dickering, no offer and counter-offer. Furthermore, no time was lost waiting for a mortgage to be approved and drawn up, because Dick paid cash, selling off some stock to come up with the money. He knew that Sharon had a right to be upset, because the stock should be considered as part of their marital

assets, but she remained calm. If she screamed, yelled, or delivered a swift kick to his shin, then he might not come back home this weekend, which she still fully expected him to do.

The couple moved out and Dick moved in and began making the house his own. He bought furniture at auction, with no decorating plan in mind beyond filling space.

Sharon drove around on a Saturday afternoon to torture herself with the cheerful bustle of his nesting. It was a particularly beautiful day, sunny and warmer than usual for April. Through the open windows she heard the familiar sound of the drill she gave him for Father's Day some years back. She knocked meekly, but when Dick didn't come to the door, she walked inside, drawn by the smell of fresh paint. Technically, she was trespassing, and felt a thrill of danger, for it seemed now that she had access to her husband's mind that had been kept so carefully closed to her for so long.

It was not a pretty sight.

The robin's egg blue of the walls made the turquoise carpet look dingy and green. The couch was threadbare and, when she moved one of the pillows, there was an evil-looking stain. What did he need so many little tables for? The one next to the couch wobbled. The room looked like a used furniture store. But the placement of lamps, books, and knickknacks like the little china piggy in a black-and-white checked jacket and bowler hat, touched her somehow. She might have recognized, but didn't, a woman's touch in the arrangement.

She followed the sound of the drill out to the kitchen, and there was Dick on a ladder, installing curtains over the window. It was a familiar sight, though he looked somehow younger in this place, more hopeful. No doubt the shabbiness of the vintage furniture contributed to the eerie sense she felt

of time rolling back. They could be settling into their first apartment together.

"Get some beers out," Dick said cheerfully.

She accepted the invitation, pulling open the refrigerator and removing two bottles of Old Milwaukee from the well-stocked lower shelf. She handed him up one of the bottles, then took a long swallow from the other, remembering how beer was always the prelude to some pretty passionate kissing. It was impossible that he wouldn't swoop down the ladder and take her in his arms. Impossible that she didn't belong here.

"Got another brush? I can--"

He shot her a look of exaggerated patience.

She tried again. "You have some interesting furniture here. I was wondering if you'd like to have your dresser from home. And maybe... your stereo system." Legally, he wasn't entitled to anything that he hadn't already taken--which included a table he'd made for her. The furniture that didn't come from her mother's attic when they were newlyweds was paid for with money she'd inherited last year when her father died. But legal considerations seemed less relevant than emotional ones, the habit of looking out for his comfort and well-being. "I would've offered sooner, but--." But she'd figured this was just a phase, like the terrible two's, and he'd outgrow it, the way the children do.

He was having trouble screwing in the curtain rod and didn't answer for a full two minutes. Then he shook his head no, totally disinterested.

How easily he shrugged off their life together, stepped out of it like a rumpled pair of undershorts! That hurt. She expected this was how it would feel in a couple of years when she went to visit Dolly in some appalling hole-in-the-wall apartment. She would want to offer something to remind Dolly

of home, and would be hurt when the offer was rejected. At the same time, she was touched by his cheerful hope, as she would be by Dolly's, and even respected him for it. She would watch with interest to see how they each reinvented themselves.

Hannah and Wolfe could be heard knocking around overhead in one of the bedrooms, and in a few minutes they came clamoring downstairs to show off a new kitten. Dick stepped down off the ladder and watched amiably while Sharon admired the cat, but it was clear that he was waiting for her to leave. She stood there, stroking the animal longer than necessary, waiting for Hannah or Wolfe to beg her to stay. But they seemed to understand--worse, to accept--that she was only company. Not even "company," for no one had invited her. She felt as rejected as--as a vacuum cleaner salesman being propelled from the house by a force greater than anything his product can generate!

She went home and wrote a poem about a flabby, two-day-old helium balloon no longer able to soar. Maybe there was a sonnet sequence in all this.

Dick was not the only one making home improvements. The ravages of winter must be attended to, and spring found the neighbors up on ladders, too, poking around, checking for missing shingles and loose gutters.

This year's April showers landed on Sophie Davenport's kitchen counter. "Oh, no!" groaned Gil. "A leaky bathtub! What's that going to cost?"

But the plumber said no, it wasn't not the bathtub, but the roof. And repairing that would cost much more.

The roofer brought over samples.

"We'll take gray," said Sophie, and the roofer laughed. There were

many more options besides color to consider. He suggested an architectural asphalt shingle with a forty-year warranty.

The neighbors watched the new roof going up and before you knew it, new roofs were going up on the house across the street and the one on the corner, too. Chuck Upton installed a magnificent water garden. The Corriganes put in a new bathroom to rival the Bonamis'. You might think that an outlay of money for a major remodeling project indicated a pretty solid marriage, but often it proved just the opposite. First you decide your bathtub needed replacing, and then you decide your spouse has to go, too. Just as one new roof starts a rash of home improvement projects, one divorce results in an outbreak. Not long after the news broke of the Hedstroms' separation, three other couples in their circle also split up, all of them long-term, apparently healthy marriages.

Each of these couples belonged to other circles and spread the disease to other married couples in those circles, as well. Those couples, in turn, passed it along to yet other couples in yet other circles. The divorce rate in this conservative Midwest town quickly caught up to national standards. The *Evening Howl*, in an article that reflected the editor's penchant for dumping unrelated facts into one story, reported that the number of couples filing for divorce in April alone was greater than the number of building permits issued, but that Vieux Chien County still enjoyed the distinction of having higher rates of seven types of cancer.

Just as puzzling was that the marriages you expected to collapse defied the odds and endured. The Bonamis', for instance, and the Davenports'. With the elections over and Gil serving another term as mayor, Sophie resumed her habit of berating him in public. Sharon overheard a tirade one Saturday outside Sonny's, when she stopped at the market for more butter:

“...and the lieutenant governor said to me, ‘I am so impressed with your husband, Mrs. Davenport.’ And I said to him, ‘Really? Well, I’m not!’”

Clearly, Sophie didn’t care who heard. But if Gil found out, would he leave her? Probably not. Sharon would never have embarrassed Dick that way. But Sophie got to wear the badge of wifehood, while Sharon had been stripped of hers and publicly humiliated. It wasn’t fair. What really made a marriage last? Great sex, prosperity, attending the same church? Having the same politics? Early death? Not even that. Habit, maybe. Convenience Or hope. Maybe the couples who stayed together were biding their time until the right person came along.

Seventeen

Dane had moved up the ranks of the PTA in record time, from hospitality committee to grad bash to candidate for next year's secretary at the middle school (They'd offered him president, but he turned it down, not wanting the responsibility.). The principals at all three of his daughters' schools knew him by name. Mr. Angst, the high school principal, asked him to serve on the strategic planning committee that would make recommendations to the school board for new construction in the district. If only he got paid for his time and talent, Marijayne wouldn't mind. But of course he didn't get paid, nor was his volunteer work limited to the PTA. A member of the band boosters, he spent weekends driving a van load of young musicians to various competitions around the state, bunking on the floors of drafty gymnasiums. Marijayne didn't mind his being gone: it gave her time to think, often in the company of her lawyer friend.

During one of Dane's weekends on the road with the band, Mr. Denmark, long-time chair of the high school music program, suggested that he join the alumni band. "We could use a little help in the wind section," he said.

So Dane pulled his old clarinet from the attic and cleaned it up. The alumni band practiced the first and third Monday of the month and the members went out afterward for a beer. It was a lot of fun, of course, and after the first night, he got over the shock of seeing how much everyone else had changed since they'd played in Mr. Denmark's band as students. They still had the same sense of fun and lack of musical talent. As the evening

wore on, the years peeled away, or seemed to, in the same way Marijayne imagined that her face masks really did slough off dead cells to reveal a younger face that was there all along. The band members' behavior tended to regress during the course of the evening, taking the form of sudden coughing attacks at inopportune moments in the music, the pinching of soloists, even sneaking out for a smoke or a bit of harmless flirting, if flirting can ever be completely harmless. Some nights they giggled, chortled, and chuckled far more than they made music on their instruments. The alumni band served as a great safety valve for its members, taking them back to a time when they had hope for the future.

Mostly, their families enjoyed the benefits wrought by this rejuvenation, but not Marijayne. Once, when the Jeep was out of commission, she had to drop Dane off at band practice before driving around to the YMCA for the girls' swim practice (that is, a rendezvous with Dick). As he climbed out of the passenger's seat and removed his instrument case, he chuckled and said, "Bye, Mom!" She was not amused.

Another time, he asked her to attend the Battle of the Alumni Bands in Saginaw, and when she refused, he whined, "The other spouses are going!"

"Do you hear yourself? You sound like one of the girls!" she snapped, then later, whined to her mother, her sister, her best friend, Debbie, and of course to Dick Hedstrom, "I feel any more as if I had four children instead of three."

Her mother counseled patience, and reminded her of the "for better, for worse" clause in her wedding vows. Dick, however, advised that it all depended on how you interpreted the fine print in the contract.

Then the period of his suspension from veterinary practice was over; all Dane had to do was pay a reinstatement fee and take a few continuing

education credits, and he could resume his practice.

"Do it!" Marijayne pleaded, and he promised to make out the check and get information on conferences he could attend. But he kept putting it off. There was always some other detail that needed attention regarding Las Vegas Night at the high school or unexpected problems concerning the reservations for Laura's class trip to Toronto. He took on more and more commitments and allowed everything else to take precedence over his professional affairs.

He basked in the good opinion of those who admired his involvement at school. It was a welcome relief from the upward climb he'd felt his whole professional career to have been. Defying the odds, daring to dream, and then the relentless struggle to succeed. Being the first in the family to go to college, to finish college, to go to medical school, to graduate medical school, to.... the list of firsts once exhilarated him, but now it only made him exhausted. How had he managed so much? Of course he knew the answer: Marijayne.

He told her now, "Sometimes I think God allowed Sweetie to die--no. I wonder if God let this happened so I could think about what I want to with the rest of my life."

"But you can't think. You have responsibilities.... You have diplomas, credentials--the clinic! Do you realize how lucky you are? Another paper mill closed last week. Over a hundred people lost the only jobs they know how to do. They'd kill to have what you have."

He looked uncomfortable for a second, but it passed and he shook his head.

"Patients--animals, people depend on you!" She heard her voice getting shrill and with great effort spoke more quietly. "Dane, it would be

like deserting me and the girls."

He took her hands and held them steady and, gazing intently into her eyes as if she were an agitated cow, he said soothingly, "I've given twenty years of my life to medicine. I can't believe God expects me to go through the motions when my heart isn't in it any more."

She pulled her hands away and snapped, "Medicine, my foot! You were never a real doctor to begin with."

"You're not going to start in on me about that again, after all these years?"

She tried again. "You're right. Being a vet is not a sacred calling. God wouldn't be disappointed if you gave it up—but He would be angry if you turn your back on your responsibilities. I'd be angry. I might have to do whatever I felt I had to do...."

He ignored the threat, or maybe he didn't hear it. It was a relief, he said, to accomplish the small tasks of this PTA committee and that one. He found he enjoyed the cooperative efforts of a team, where no one person was solely responsible for anything.

Dane had hoped to ease his own burden by baring his heart to his wife, but her capacity for empathy and support had been stretched to the limits by the entire Sweetie episode. He may as well have just confided that he wanted to undergo a sex change. He was forever needing to be charged up like a battery, drawing energy from her, and now she felt her own supply fizzling. She wanted a man to depend on for once, forgetting that Dane had been quite dependable for quite a long time.

She allowed that he needed a temporary break from the high-stakes concerns of medicine—albeit of the veterinary variety, but there was a threat in her tone as she reminded him of his responsibilities to Eloise, Laura, and

Beatrice. "You can go to Tahiti and take up art, if you want to--after the girls get through college."

Then she went to see Dick and let him tell her about his day in court. She had a headache, what with everything on her own mind. But she forced herself to listen and offer the requisite applause for his derring do before the court. If she were a smart girl and played her cards right, she'd be glad later that she'd put up a good show.

Dane got a job, and thought Marijayne would be pleased. Long ago she'd talked about opening a restaurant, and Mr. McDougall, the owner of the pizza shop, hinted that he was looking to sell the business in the not-too-distant future. Dane would learn the business from the ground up and eventually he and Marijayne would buy it--the way they bought everything else: on credit. Fr'Angelico's was a high-class operation, with the slogan "...where pizza is an art form." His uniform consisted of a white poet's blouse, apron, and a beret. His name tag identified him as an artist-in-training. He came home smelling of all things Italian, an oily, yeasty smell that permeated the rest of the laundry, as Marijayne learned when Vera Krause sniffed one morning at work and asked, "What is that fragrance? Gardenia and--garlic?"

He liked his job. He made people happy. They came into the shop, worn out after a day at the factory or school. They were all tense when they placed their order but then you could see them visibly relaxing while they watched you prepare their meal. Some exchange was taking place that involved more than money: they gave you their stress, their lousy day, and you rolled it all up in a ball and transformed it. More than just supper was taken care of. "Have a good evening," Dane told them and really meant it.

Kids were different. They came in all keyed up, having a good time and just wanting to make it last longer. So hungry they couldn't stand still, their jeans drooping right off their skinny butts. Let us be kids as long as possible, they seemed to be saying when they counted out their pooled change into your hand. If they came up a little short, Dane threw in the difference. He fed them and it made him feel good. Life was going to be hard enough, let them believe otherwise for as long as possible.

Rich or poor, young and old, they all came in for pizza. It was a great leveler. He explained this to the Rev. Damschroder one Sunday after services. "If Jesus were alive today, Reverend, he'd have the apostles distribute pepperoni pizzas instead of loaves and fishes. The last supper would be pizza and Coke."

Dane was always thinking of ways they might improve their product. He persuaded the boss to switch to low-fat mozzarella and turkey sausage. He insisted that they chop the vegetables fresh and store them properly so they wouldn't lose their vitamins. He rewrote the menu to stress the nutritional value of their product, listing the fat content of burgers and fries next to the vitamin content of green peppers and tomatoes. He was always coming up with ideas, and when he did he dropped his knife and scribbled his idea onto a note pad.

Mr. McDougall was always finding memos pasted to his office door with a dab of dried dough. One idea was a contest to see who could guess the vitamin-rich secret ingredient in their new sauce. When the boss asked, "What ingredient might that be, Dane?" he replied, "Grated carrot!"

He'd felt a bit deflated that Mr. McD. didn't seem more enthusiastic.

Another idea was an art show during which the "artists-in-residence" would create pizza portraits or architectural masterpieces for a seating of

customers.

"A leaning tower of pizza," he explained to the boss. "Abstract expressionism on a pizza crust canvas."

He climbed the ranks from counter to pizza chef to manager in record time. Try as he might, Dane couldn't avoid the leadership positions in any field. Even with his manager's salary, though, the money wasn't enough, and in the back of his mind he wondered how Marijayne was paying the bills.

She wasn't—not all of them, anyway. She was letting them pile up in the mahogany secretary in the living room, that ridiculous piece—once her pride and joy, that taunted her now as a towering emblem of her foolish pretensions. The gleaming drawers and high colonial bonnet held the shameful secret of their insolvency. All the little drawers and secret compartments were stuffed with bills they couldn't pay. She confided her money problems to no one.

Dick, of course, knew something of their financial straits, because he was one of the unpaid creditors. He was intimate with the yeasty, oily scent that wafted from her very skin these days when he peeled off her clothes as they lay on top of the snowy bedspread of his single twin-sized mattress that reminded Sharon of his bachelor digs and the bed where they'd first made love. One day he murmured something about garlic and Marijayne confessed that Dane had taken a position as "artist in residence" cum pizza chef. Dick couldn't help but howl, calling her his little Italian peasant until Marijayne stiffened with pride and the little bit of wifely loyalty left in her.

Dick immediately sobered and listened to the details of her embarrassment when two burly men had come to the house on Grand Boulevard to repossess the mahogany secretary.

"Go ahead," I told them, "Take it. Take everything! I don't want any

of it any more!' They were thugs , I tell you. I'm sure that in another life they must have been raping, looting, murdering Huns."

Dick could hear her words to these louts tinkle off the crystal chandelier, rattle the Wedgewood in the cherry cabinet, and set the felt-padded strings humming in the baby grand piano before being muffled in the deep, plush carpeting. He could see her watching helplessly as the merciless marauders calmly removed the top section with the bonnet and pineapple finial and carried that out to the truck, then returned for the lower section. He saw her horror when, as the men opened the drop-down panel on the front, one of the hinges sprang loose and all the bills she'd stashed inside were disgorged onto the carpet. The men stepped over these on the way out.

"Be careful! Don't scratch it!" she couldn't help but say, feeling a mother's loss when they slammed shut the truck doors and took her darling away. Dick cradled her tenderly, running his fingers down the ribs of her delicate back. "Let me take care of you. Leave Dane. Move in here with me. I would never let anyone take your things!" he crooned, but he didn't know if she was listening. Her voice was a little cool as she took an inventory of what she still possessed, and it gave Dick a little chill to hear her. She still had her real antiques, she said, the pieces that Dane's mother had bought for her over the years, some occasional tables, her dining room set, her vanity, Laura's four-poster bed.

He offered cash, which Marijayne refused in a way that suggested she could eventually be persuaded to accept it—but only to help pay for Eloise's violin lessons or Beatrice's braces. It would be wrong to take money for her personal needs. It would cast their little trysts in a bad light. She enjoyed being Dick's mistress—she'd even given up her Lysol baths after lovemaking,

but she was not a tramp. She was Jellie Braden, deep and mysterious, the kind of woman who haunts a middle-aged man's dreams. Sometimes he spoke of a time when she would move in with him and not have to worry about bills, but that would never happen. She was no child bride blinded by love, prepared to live in a hovel and build a life from the ground up. He was dealing with a different class of woman now.

Two days later, Dick brought over the oil painting she'd helped him pick out at the auction house, Eros chasing a plump, creamy nymph around some forest and pulling off a swath of fabric that barely covered her hips. An envelope taped to the back of the canvas held five hundred dollars in cash, which Marijayne accepted with dignity and good grace.

She did not invite him inside.

The time had come to tell Dane to move out.

He did not wink. Dane Hoffman would wink no more--had not, in fact, since Ray Murray broke his nose. "Is there someone else?" he asked, and when the name Dick Hedstrom trembled on the air between them, he felt the earth quake under his feet, though it did not open up and swallow him.

He thought back to the many appointments in Hedstrom's office--so many appointments. He'd wondered why they'd had to go in for such small things, some one question or other that couldn't be answered over the phone--and saw signs everywhere: looks exchanged, Marijayne's attention to appearance--excessive even for her. She'd worn so much cologne, his memories of these appointments wafted to him on sodden puffs of Shalimar.

They'd both seemed dedicated to helping him. He'd been so grateful. What a fool he was! He remembered the lunch he'd bought for them after the hearing before the veterinary board. Hedstrom hadn't even won him an

acquittal, but Dane had actually ordered champagne! He thought of the necklace he'd given her with the gold dog with diamond chip eyes. Now he realized that he'd never seen her wear it. He'd underestimated her fear--for herself. At some point she must have figured he was a lost cause and decided she had to save herself. He could actually pity her for it and blamed himself. Of course she'd fallen in love. It was the classic triangle: two men, one weak, one strong, and a beautiful woman with torn loyalties. Under the circumstances, Dane would have chosen Dick over himself.

No he wouldn't. "For better, for worse...as long as you both shall live." He'd said it and meant it.

He did not wink. If he had, she could have laughed inside and thought him a fool. Instead, his face took on an expression she'd never seen there before, and it gave him more dignity than she'd ever imagined possible. A noble look that quite took her aback. As long as he wore that look, she couldn't laugh at him, or even pity him. It unsettled her and made her feel out of her depth.

During the coming weeks, that look came and went. Dane wavered between two states, the other state being one of apparent insanity, in which he behaved at a developmental level comparable to that of Eloise, who was seventeen. He smiled, he whistled, he came home every night smelling of pizza, he whistled, he smiled. He went to band practice.

Eloise, Beatrice, and Laura, advised that a break-up was imminent (but not why), were naturally devastated. Beatrice, of course, had joked with Hannah Hedstrom about this possibility; still, even she denied it could be happening. Their loyalties, finally, weighed in with their mother, who was showing signs of stress--mostly over money. Daddy, relentlessly cheerful and mild, appeared to be the one who wanted the divorce. Didn't he realize

that he was losing them, too? Didn't he care? The girls couldn't discuss their fears with him as long as he wore that cheerful smile. But if he wanted a divorce, why didn't he move out? Why did he keep bringing home pizzas? They adopted Mother's attitude of elaborate patience, and treated Daddy as if he were a lovable but simple-minded fool gone mad. Encouraged by this show of support, Marijayne began dropping Dick's name now and then, casting him as her good friend and their savior and hero. Of course Mr. Hedstrom was Daddy's friend and savior as well. Gradually, the way a cook adds hot liquid to beaten egg yolks to prevent curdling, Marijayne revealed tidbits that suggested the friendship was deepening into romance. Happy to see Marijayne dance about the kitchen again a few inches above the Italian tile floor, cheered to see Dane's determined smile when he came in at night to find Dick there (Dane started bringing enough pizza for Dick, as well), and relieved that life would continue much as before, Hoffman girls came to terms with the painful reality. They learned that, while life was unreliable, much was to be gained by keeping on good terms with a man.

His close friends saw a different Dane, one who wept, who searched his soul, who blamed himself. Ewan MacGregor, Gus Bonami, Guill Bedford IV, and Dane's younger brother Billy took him out after band practice and bought him drinks, and gave various opinions on what he should do. Ewan MacGregor, who taught high school English, thought Dane should file for divorce on grounds of adultery and not give Marijayne a dime in alimony. Ewan's seniors were reading Othello now, and every day Ewan worked himself into a state over the Moor's downfall, caused by a woman. Lifting his shot glass of Jack Daniels, he said, "To Desdemona. To all women who give their man the shaft. And eventually they all do." He drank his whiskey.

Dane set down his glass untasted. "Desdemona was innocent. And

Marijayne is... not entirely guilty."

"She ruined him, man. He couldn't think straight any more."

"That was his own fault. He shouldn't have listened to Iago in the first place. Even I know that. You're teaching my children literature?"

"You're teaching my daughters about women?" Gus Bonami didn't know Desdemona from Gertrude, but he didn't like MacGregor's attitude.

"Dane, if you want to save your marriage, you've got to spoil her a little. Have you seen our new hot tub?" He reddened and the others hooted or made lewd noises.

"Have you seen my credit? The chandelier in the front hall alone was shipped from Italy--I won't even tell you what that cost."

"You spoiled her all along, man. Now you're paying the price."

Guil Bedford IV, great-grandson of the founder of the bubble gum factory, waved a hand to change the subject. "Forget Marijayne--what about Hedstrom? Isn't it unethical for attorneys to have affairs with the wives of clients? The bastard should be disbarred. Sue him."

Dane shook his head. "No way. I owe him too much."

"Hey, we'll all chip in. How much?" Ewan MacGregor pulled out his wallet.

"Not money, Ewan. Well, not just money. He saved my career. I might have lost my license."

"But you're not practicing any more, so what's the difference?"

"He saved my neck. You have no idea.... Besides, I'm no longer a client. The timing was a bit premature, that's all. I, of all people, don't blame him for falling in love with my wife." It felt good to say such noble things. It made him believe them, and helped him believe in himself again.

"But it's adultery, man!" argued Ewan, still hoping to whip Dane into a

rage. "'Would you would bear your fortune like a man.' Do you like wearing the horns? Do you enjoy being a cuckold?"

Gus Bonami choked on his beer.

Billy said nothing, but lay his hand on Dane's solid shoulder. He'd had a secret crush on his sister-in-law for years and felt brother's anguish as his own. Guill Bedford remembered his Shakespeare. "What do you want him to do? Strangle Marijayne and then kill himself?" he asked.

"No. I want him to let me beat the brains out of Dick Hedstrom! Ha! Dick Head-strom!"

Dil Fitz, who was sitting at a nearby table with his girlfriend, B.J., in the cloud of pot that always enveloped him, was listening in, and flashed Ewan a thumbs up. He'd helped get Dick elected, but resented him all the same as a lawyer and a rich man. "You can call names if you like, Ewan, but I'm not going to beat up anyone, much less kill them. I'm going to wait it out. Marijayne has a crush--as a teacher, that ought to be obvious to you. In time, the thrill will wear off, when she weighs it against what we have together--especially when she sees what I can do with the business. I hope to win her back, one pizza at a time."

When he said that, Ewan lost it, and Gus, who was also unconvinced, jumped in again with "Well, maybe you're right. Marijayne didn't you to be a vet, if I recall."

"But she probably doesn't want to be married to the manager of a pizza joint, either."

"Owner, Ewan. Some day."

They all gave up, seeing that it was useless, though they each had a different idea as to why. Ewan thought Dane didn't have enough balls, while Gus was convinced he was just too nice a guy. Guill, meanwhile, was afraid

his old friend was losing his mind.

Night after night Dane brought home a new combo, with toppings like nothing you'd find at any other franchise in town: sliced beef tenderloin, crumbled bacon, blue cheese, eggs benedict. He ceremoniously sprinkled on hot pepper flakes and garnished each paper plate with packets of moist towelettes.

"Presentation is everything," he murmured.

Marijayne, who wanted him to not come home at all, was not impressed.

"Can I help you pack?" she asked pointedly on any number of evenings.

"Pack? Why, no. Why should I pack?" he said. "If you want a separation, then separate. Go. Via con dios!" He thought he was calling her bluff, and indeed she did not begin packing. His hope deepened, and he reminded her that she'd been the one to teach him hope, years ago, when so many times his spirits had flagged after a tough exam or a professor had humiliated him in the lab.

"We've got history, Baby," he reminded her. "'Fido.' Remember? Hmmm?"

Oh, she remembered.

She would have to enlist help, and the people most likely to have an impact were his parents. When Dane graduated from veterinary school, his mother had gone around inviting all the neighbors to the party. "We've got a doctor in the family!" she'd cried. (At the party several people had asked Marijayne what her husband's specialization was. She had not been able to tell them. "Large animals" stuck in her throat like one of the cocktail

meatballs.) When Sweetie died and the news of Dane's professional problems hit the papers, his parents continued to hold their heads high, daring critics to say something so that old Mr. Hoffman could belt them in the chops. No one did. When Dane's smiling image, attired in his Fr'Angelico's beret and poet's shirt, began appearing on billboards around town, spooning sauce onto a pizza dough canvas, his parents retreated to their house, pulled the drapes in the living room, and stopped answering the phone. They'd scrimped and saved for their son's education, for this? For this they'd scoured auctions and flea markets for fine antiques with which to furnish the huge house on Grand Boulevard? For this they'd played yard man and nanny so Milord and Lady could enjoy a lifestyle like nothing experienced by any Hoffman in living memory? They'd telephoned Marijayne, who commiserated with them, playing the long-suffering, understanding wife without mentioning that she'd asked for a divorce.

Now they must be told about the divorce--for it didn't seem that they'd heard that news yet, not even from Billy.

"I think we should tell them together," Dane insisted, hoping she'd back out.

She didn't. "Fine, I'll come with you," she said. "We'll do it together."

Indeed she did need his solid presence, she found, when they walked into the unpretentious living room of his parents' house where Mrs. Hoffman displayed her most valued possessions, dozens upon dozens of family photos. Everywhere she looked, Marijayne saw her own smiling face peering out from a frame, now with the girls, now with Dane, now with her mother- and father-in-law, now with Billy and his wife, Gloria, giving the lie to her present claim that she'd been unhappy for a very, very long time. She gripped Dane's hand, but he gently pulled it away. Her carefully-rehearsed

words vanished, gone perhaps wherever it is words go when a computer system crashes.

To her horror, Dane blurted, "Mom, Dad, Marijayne wants a divorce."

The announcement hit the old folks like lightning. Old Mr. Hoffman's knees buckled and he sat right down on the couch, while Mrs. Hoffman's hand flew to her chest and she gasped loudly. Their faces turned gray. It was a few moments before Mrs. Hoffman recovered enough to blurt out a single, anguished syllable: "Why?"

Time stood still. The birds in the yard stopped mid-chirp and the very clouds scudding across the sky skidded to a halt. All eyes in the room turned on Marijayne, who screwed up her face in misery, and sniveled, "Well, gee, no one stays married forever any more!" Then she cringed, as if waiting for someone to slap her. At least she had the decency to know she deserved it.

The flame under the teakettle on the burner went out as her words, so profound, so weighty, set into motion a rumbling of molecules that moved out from the small living room in Vieux Chien, Michigan, in all directions, causing a small earthquake in the Caucasus Mountains and a tidal wave in Bimini. The effects are still being felt as far away as the constellation Draco, causing his dragon's tail to twitch; and who knows but they may not be another cause of global warming?

Old Mr. Hoffman looked from the Marijayne sniveling before him, her features twisted and closed, to the Marijayne in the wedding photo behind her on the mantel, her face, in a cloud of bridal illusion, open and filled with hope. The difference was uncanny. This was more than a change of heart or the changes of time; she was sick to her very soul. And Dane, too, if he wasn't mistaken. He remembered how Marijayne had transformed his son, a boy with many abilities but no direction, and helped him to focus, the same

way that his wife, Penney, could train a vine to channel all the nutrients from the roots into one blossom and produce a monster pumpkin. Now vine, stem, and farmer alike were stricken with a secret blight. His angina, that night, worsened, no doubt from worry; but he knew there'd be other, farther-reaching effects for his whole family.

On her side of the bed, Penney whispered the names of her grand babies over and over, "Eloise, Beatrice, Laura...." Could she ever forgive her daughter-in-law? Maybe. In about fifty years, if she started now and never stopped trying. But she didn't have fifty years left to her, so it didn't seem likely to happen. Not ever.

Dane watched Marijayne industriously pack up her figurines and antiques. As each piece disappeared into a cardboard carton, leaving a bare space along a gleaming white shelf, he felt a curious satisfaction, as if one more weight were being removed from his chest. She made a dozen trips to U-Haul for more cartons, more tape, more bubble wrap, sparing no expense to ensure that her precious possessions came through the move intact. As usual, Marijayne's energetic cheerfulness was contagious and Dane rolled up his sleeves and went to work, helping her. "Many hands make light work," he said. If they didn't know better, an onlooker might guess that Dane wanted the divorce as much as she did.

He noticed that for all the packing they were doing, there were only a small number of cartons piling up, ready for the movers. Finally Marijayne admitted that she and Dick had moved a few cartons of the most fragile and valuable stuff over to the new house.

Another man might have seized on the image of Dick sneaking over while he was at work to steal him blind, but Dane only asked, "You mean

Dick's new house, the one he's living in now?"

"You've got to be joking. It's too small, for one thing. We need eight bedrooms, but had to settle for six. Dolly and Hannah will have to share, and so will Dick's boys." For the moment, their names slipped her mind.

"Six bedrooms!"

"Well, two of the rooms are in the attic. I told Dick I thought his children would like to be up there together. Of course, it's not heated, but we'll put space heaters up there, or something."

Dane wondered what Sharon had to say about that. Probably plenty--not that anyone would listen.

"And where did you manage to find a house with six bedrooms?"

"You're not going to believe this. It's across the street from your parents."

"What?" Flabbergasted, Dane dropped the china Cupid he'd been wrapping, but Marijayne caught it before it hit the floor.

"Listen, the movers are coming Saturday. Do you think you could be out by then? It would be easier, all the way around."

"I suppose I could manage that. Aren't you even a little curious about where I'm moving to? You may as well know. I'm moving in with my parents."

The china Cupid landed on the hard wood floor, and smashed into smithereens. Dane was glad, and the more Marijayne bemoaned the loss, the gladder he felt. He found that he was capable of some mean feelings and evil wishes after all.

Eighteen

Lorraine phoned Dane from the clinic about an electrical problem in the operating room.

"Did you have to say operating room? I can't deal with this right now--"

Lorraine was no longer in love with Dane. Dr. Brodsky had replaced him at the clinic and in Lorraine's affections. But Dr. Brodsky deflected her overtures just as Dane used to do. No doubt Dr. Brodsky was in love with her, but couldn't quite bring himself to admit it because of the age difference and because he's a married man. Lorraine still thinks such things matter any more.

Exasperated, she told Dane, "Someone had better deal with this electrical problem or we're going to have another law suit on our hands when another dog dies on the table because the doctor can't see what he's doing!"

Dane considered this. "I'll be in around one." Then, to conciliate her, he added, "I'll bring a pizza."

He prepared the pizza himself, throwing on a little of everything--but no pepperoni. The employees were not to help themselves to the pepperoni, the boss said. They were running out and the new shipment had been delayed.

When he arrived at the clinic, the office appeared deserted, though all the lights were on. He was glad to be alone for this first pulling open of the door--such a familiar act. It could be an ordinary morning. He didn't want

anyone to intrude, to see the memories wash over his face. The sweet-sharp scent of disinfectant and the peal of woofs and yaps coming from the kennels as always brought a stab of something like hunger, or maybe mother love. If he were a lactating female, his milk would let down now. He stood in the doorway, taking it all in: the heavy wooden chairs, the slate floor, the display rack of flyers on heartworm and fleas, the bags of dog food and cat food, Lorraine's reception desk with the unfriendly notice "Payment Due at Time of Service." A void opened up in his midsection, a gaping sink hole that must be filled, and quickly. He stood like a ghost in the middle of the reception area. For the first time since Sweetie's death, he mourned the passing of Dane Hoffman, D.V.M. Tears stood in his eyes and if he didn't get moving, he might cry.

The pizza in his hands brought him back from the edge. He knew that a vegetable deluxe pizza was not going to touch this hunger, not even one with extra cheese. He craved meat. He crossed the reception area and entered the cubicle that did double duty as storage and lunch room.

Steam poured from the freezer when he opened the door. He pulled out packages of gonads and tumors and Lean Cuisines and piled them onto the counter, looking for the meatloaf he remembered throwing in there once. All the packages were properly labeled, but Dane didn't bother reading labels. He knew a gizzard from a pig's knuckle. At last he found it and tossed the plastic bag into the microwave to thaw, but left it in too long and when he pulled open the bag, the meat inside was rather shriveled, and thoroughly cooked. The escaping steam made his mouth water.

Lorraine came in just as he was putting the doctored-up pizza into the microwave to heat through. She inhaled the scent of basil and tomato sauce and watched while Dane scrubs his hands, shaking the excess water into the

sink. He held them out as if for her to glove them for surgery.

She didn't smile at this small attempt at humor.

"I'm dealing with things, okay? I'm here! Let's eat."

"It does smell good," she murmured, removing two plastic plates from the cupboard over the microwave. They sat at the counter and helped themselves to the pizza. Lorraine peered at Dane as she began to nibble the wedge of pizza, testing her feelings for both. He was a handsome man--and he made a hell of a pizza--but no, she felt nothing.

"What kind of meat is this? It's not pepperoni. Is it sausage?"

He shook his head.

"Meatmhoaf," he mumbled.

"Really! It's chewy, for chuck. More the consistency of gizzards or organ meat.... About the electricity--"

He shook his head and held up a hand. "Later." He folded a slice of the pizza and then crammed the whole thing into his mouth at once. Lorraine watched in amazement, then did it herself. She hooked strips of green pepper over her ears. Dane dipped his little finger into the sauce and drew a mustache over his mouth.

No further conversation was attempted while they scarfed up the food. Incredibly, the more they consumed, the more they seem to craved. The phone rang, and they ignored it. Other than the cries of the animals out back, and the occasional chime as the front door opened and another afternoon appointment arrived, the only sound in the room was the smacking of jaws and the gnawing of teeth on crust.

"Delicious..."

"...can't get enough of this meat!"

They weren't just chewing, they were masticating.

When there was one last slice left, they both grabbed for it at once. Lorraine threw down her napkin. "You're baring your teeth at me!" she cried.

They stared at each other for agonizing seconds, growling--yes, growling. Finally, Dane lowered his head and shoved the pizza box towards her, then watched as she finished it off and then licked the sauce from the bottom of the box!

They glugged their Coke loudly. Dane wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and smacked his lips. Lorraine wiggled her eyebrows a little and pursed her shiny lips into a smile. "I'm sated, how about you?" Dane said. "Shall we proceed to the operating room and examine the patient?" He was referring to the large orb light hanging over the operating table.

He pushed open the swinging doors and waited for Lorraine to enter first, but she stopped too soon, so that when the door swung shut behind Dane, it pushed him right up against her plump-as-a-tomato butt. What happened next, and so quickly, was as astonishing as whirling lights over the water tower near Sonny's Friendly Market. Lorraine turned and, giving a little cry, leaped at him; and he buried his lips in her throat, sucking and slurping as if she were another slab of pizza.

Poor Dr. Brodsky had to deal with the afternoon appointments by himself. And it was a typical Monday. Lorraine had scheduled an appointment for a Doberman to come in for shots just as a twelve-year old Siamese cat with anxiety disorder was coming out, and the cat shot from her owner's arms and careened about the clinic, knocking down the heartworm display, colliding with the Doberman's owner and scratching her badly. Dr. Brodsky had to run for a net and a sedative before anyone else got hurt. Meanwhile, a flea infestation had been developing in the waiting room since

early morning when Lorraine forgot to spray after an elderly collie was brought in for a bath. The embraces of the human pair in the operating room were nothing to the frantic couplings of thousands of fleas that were reaching sexual maturity out in plain view of anyone with eyes sharp enough to see. All day the flea population had been growing exponentially, and by 2:30 the only creature not scratching was a nine-foot long snake coiled in its glass aquarium.

Oblivious of the commotion, Dane and Lorraine emerged from the operating room, dazed, damp, and disheveled, with bee-stung lips. They surveyed the clutter in the lunch room and slowly began clearing it up, like a couple who've just thrown a party.

"Maybe some of this stuff could be tossed out," Dane said, turning moony eyes on his receptionist, his nostrils wiggling, as if he were on the verge of jumping her again.

But Lorraine nudged him gently and reminded him that procedures must be followed. Each dated package might be crucial evidence in another lawsuit at some later time.

She watched Dane toss the bags carelessly into the freezer with no attempt at organization, and when he got out of room in the freezer, she clucked her tongue like a scolding parakeet and asked, "Do you operate this way, too? Just stuff everything back in any old way? If it doesn't fit, toss it out?"

She pulled everything back out of the freezer and spread it out onto the counter. "Why don't we try arranging them by date?"

But that proved just as inefficient as Dane's helter-skelter storage. A whole cow's udder teetered on top of a parakeet carcass with freezer burn, then slid out and almost smashed Lorraine's toe.

"How about we put the guts on one side and the tumors on the

bottom shelf; maybe the severed limbs inside the door? They take up the most room," Dane suggested.

The cries from the waiting room swelled in intensity. Human, canine, and feline voices blended in a chorus of misery as newly-hatching fleas fed on their flesh. But Dane and Lorraine are too engrossed in their work to pay attention. They sorted the frozen body parts onto the counter. "Guts, brains, gonads, hearts...."

"Hmmm. This one isn't marked."

"It looks like--"

"Meatloaf."

"But if that's meatloaf, what was it that I put on the pizza?"

"Maybe there were two bags of meatloaf."

From the waiting room came the scraping of chair legs on the ceramic tile floor and a cacophony of angry, bewildered voices. Dr. Brodsky could be heard crying through cupped hands, "Clear the room! Clear the room! Evacuate the building!"

"I hardly think there's be two bags of meatloaf," Dane objected.

The front door crashed open and frantic feet drummed past the lunch room as all fur-bearing occupants fled the onslaught of the minuscule predators.

Unperturbed, Dane and Lorraine continued to stack the packages of frozen body parts on the freezer shelves before the contents began thawing. Casually, Dane picked up each little frozen heart and read the label.

"Where's Sweetie's heart?"

"With the rest of her, I imagine. Didn't you say the family buried her in the backyard?"

"No, it should be in here." He was dimly aware of a prickling on both

legs, just above his socks.

"But you didn't remove Sweetie's heart."

"Yes, I did."

"But--why?"

"I don't remember why. Never mind why! Just help me find it!" he cried, scratching his right calf with the toe of his left shoe, suddenly aware that he was being eaten alive.

He looked in the refrigerator, while Lorraine searched the cupboards and then the trash. "Here!" she said, pulling a crumpled bag from the trash can. She read the label aloud: "Sweetie's Heart. 6-23--. The ink is smeared I can't read the year."

Dane took the bag and stared at it, blanching. "Empty!" The bag fluttered to the floor like a deflated lung and he scrounged the trash some more.

There was no empty meatloaf bag. At last, he looked up. Lorraine was doubled over and furiously scratching both ankles.

"We must have eaten it. Sweetie's heart. Lorraine, we ate Sweetie's heart!"

Dr. Brodsky rushed in with something like a grenade in his hand.

"I've got a bomb!" he yelled. "Run for your lives! The fleas--oh, the fleas!"

He exited through the doors leading to the reception room and Dane had just enough time to hurry Lorraine out the front door before his assistant tossed the flea bomb and wiped out the burgeoning menace.

Dane was stalking Lorraine. There's no other way of putting it.

Lorraine was stalking Dane.

The chase was everything. Lorraine developed a sixth sense and knew by the prickling along her spine when Dane was near. Dane's sense of smell grew uncannily sensitive. He could pick up Vera's scent in a crowd, but always, just before they met head-on, they turned separate corners and delayed gratification as long as possible. A small part of his mind struggled to preserve some dignity, some moral integrity, but mostly he didn't care where they were or who might see when they finally came together.

And then, mercifully, after about five and-a-half days, the obsession vanished. It was just gone, as mysteriously and suddenly as it had appeared. Dane supposed it could be a sort of survival response of his psyche to the loss of Marijayne. But if that were the case, how to explain Lorraine's equally intense fixation on him? Dane wondered if there might be some other explanation worth sniffing out.

"I've got to get to the heart of the matter," he thought. The heart of the matter, indeed. He remembered all too well that the unseemly sexual encounter in the operating room had occurred almost right after they'd eaten the pizza topped with Sweetie's shriveled, microwaved heart. He'd never studied anthropology like Sharon Hedstrom, but he'd read somewhere that tribal warriors consume the hearts of their enemies in order to acquire their courage; the act expressed their total triumph, but also their respect for a worthy opponent. He felt like the fool of fate, unwittingly compelled to complete the desecration of an animal he'd given his life to help.

Clearly some connection linked the two events: the eating of Sweetie's heart and the insane pursuit of Lorraine as if she were in heat. If only some portion of the organ were available, he might conduct some experiments to determine whether the bizarre attraction had been the result of eating the heart itself, or the fact that the heart had been Sweetie's heart. The little dog

had, after all, won Best of Show ribbons three or four times, and that only happened when a dog has Charisma with a capital "C."

Alas, they had apparently consumed the entire heart. No part of the organ remained for such experiments. He thought of doing tests on other types of animal flesh to see if similar results occurred, but then immediately rejected the idea. People eat animal flesh all the time and copulate all the time, but without such an apparent connection between the two activities. No, he felt sure the result depended upon the fact that the flesh they'd consumed had been Sweetie's.

Unless, of course, the condition of the meat as dog flesh were the critical factor. If the test results were negative, then perhaps he could get permission to exhume Sweetie's body and obtain tissue samples from other organs. The Murrays would never agree—he'd have to go to court, and that would be expensive. Although Dick Hedstrom would get the court order or whatever was necessary to arrange for the exhumation. God knew Dick Hedstrom owed him something for being such a good sport and handing over Marijayne as if she were a traveling trophy.

Nineteen

Sharon was oblivious of a good deal, and certainly of Dick's affair, staunchly defending him every time her sister called long distance to ask if she'd found out yet, "Who is she?"

"He's not having an affair. Dick wouldn't cheat. He's just trying to find himself."

"I thought he'd done that when he ran for office and they told him he was the new law director. And before that, I thought he'd finally figured out he was a Unitarian. There were a few other times, too, that I can recall when Dick figured out who he was."

"Well, then, he's reinventing himself, and frankly, I admire him for it. It's a scary process, you know, groping for some indefinable something that feels right."

In retrospect, an unfortunate way of putting it.

If anyone knew about Dick and Marijayne, no one was talking to her anyway, except for Randi Fitz, and of course Randi was going through a divorce, too. Her mind was on her own problems and not on sniffing out gossip. Randi still came over every night and made Sharon go for a walk. Poor Randi. Didn't she get enough grief listening to her clients all day? Nothing she said helped. For one thing, she didn't fully appreciate the grimness of her situation, Sharon thought. Randi counseled women who'd been raped by their fathers and beaten by their boyfriends or bilked of their nest egg by an addict brother. In her book, being screwed by only one man in her life made Sharon a winner. For another, Randi liked Dick and hoped to

remain friends with both him and Sharon.

Sharon wanted to wallow, to luxuriate in a bubble bath of pity. She wanted a champion who would exonerate her while damning Dick to hell. She was convinced that Randi was in love with Dick. She should be generous; Randi deserved Dick. She took Sharon's self-pity, her anger, her self-centeredness--she'd be perfect for Dick. She was so convinced that Randi was interested in Dick, that one evening, when they happened to walk by Dick's yard, she didn't even notice the dark blue van parked in the driveway. Or maybe she didn't see it because it was such a familiar sight when parked in the Hoffmans' driveway next door. She never thought of Dick with another woman but Randi.

On nights when she managed to avoid Randi, Sharon watched television on a small set she bought for her bedroom. She enjoyed programs on home repair and politics--shows that Dick used to watch. She placed a pot of sweet basil on the windowsill--Dick always planted it in the garden--and lay on her side of the bed, listening to stuffy men in neckties argue about the capital gains tax and smelling the peppery basil, and remembering.

She remembered how he came to see her in the hospital after Wolfe was born and brought her the first ripe tomato from the garden. Her roommate's husband brought her roses. You could get roses any time, but how often did the first tomato come ripe?

She remembered hot summer nights when she'd cook whole meals of home-grown vegetables and homemade pasta that she cranked out by hand on the little machine Dick had given her for her birthday. While the pasta dried over the backs of the kitchen chairs, she chopped tomatoes, onions, zucchini, and green peppers and listened to Hannah playing with Beatrice Hoffman in the apple tree. She'd glance out the window from time to time

and watch Dick mowing the lawn, shirtless, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, while nearby Wolfe played in his tractor tire sandbox. She'd see Dolly cutting across the neighbor's yard on her way home from Julie's, and Hunter pulling in on his bike, kicking up the gravel in the drive.

She didn't blame God. Horrible things happened to people every day that they didn't deserve. He didn't owe her anything. But she stopped praying. She couldn't bear to go to church, where people could see her and witness her shame or glimpse her pain.

Gardening, politics, and something verging on religious crisis: she was turning into Dick or else belatedly becoming the perfect woman for him. Or were these interests merely evidence that she couldn't let go? Was the real Sharon still lost somewhere in his identity?

Oh for the sanity of the never-ending calendar in Spire Square! She longed to be embraced by the monotony of an endless round of events that long ago lost any of their original meaning. At least they gave you a sense of belonging. You knew what to expect and when. You didn't need to think so hard about how to conduct your life. A structure was already in place and you merely had to conform to it. Thank goodness for the academic calendar! That at least gave her some sense of night and day, of up and down. There was even an element of progress built into it that was missing from the never-ending calendar. You registered for new classes at regularly prescribed intervals, implying advancement, progress towards some definable end. You gave yourself up to the process and allowed yourself to be passed along through the system, trusting that the information that's being stuffed into your head will translate into useful job skills. She believed in the magic of the process, just as she once believed in the power of grace to effect a spiritual transformation. That's how the wash cycle worked on her

Maytag automatic. You set the dial, added the detergent and bleach. Spin cycle followed rinse cycle followed wash cycle, every time. The outcome was ensured.

She hadn't told anyone at school that Dick had asked for--no, insisted on--a divorce, and so, for the few hours each day while she was on campus, she could fool herself that she was still intact. But she didn't fool Dr. Blankenship.

Wolfe told her it was time to put up the Christmas tree. Didn't she just do that last month? She remembered making four trips out in a snow squall, the first to buy the tree, the second to pick up a chain saw so she could trim the trunk, a third to buy a bigger tree stand, and the fourth to return the goddamn tree for something smaller (After all that, the tree had fallen over during the night, breaking ornaments and flooding the hardwood floor.) But now Hannah was begging her to open the windows and, looking out, she could see the forsythia blooming.

For so long every day felt like the day after Dick moved out, that she'd lost track of time.

Was it possible that more than a year has passed? Possible that they were now divorced?

She only vaguely remembered one day reaching into the cupboard for a coffee mug--this was down at Dick's ugly little house--and pulling out one with "Crazy for You" splashed on the sides. She'd dropped it as if it already burned her with scalding coffee.

Her sister was right: Dick was seeing someone.

He was ready to admit it, now that the "dissolution of marriage" was over and the financial settlement made, now that they'd both signed an

agreement that neither party would, under any circumstances, seek a change in said settlement.

Now when she asked if he were seeing someone, Dick replied, "Yes!"

Now he seemed eager to identify her as "Marijayne Hoffman."

Now he had no scruples about confessing that "Yes!" she had been a factor in his decision to seek a divorce.

And that's how Sharon found out about Marijayne Hoffman.

Of course he hadn't told her because he'd wanted to avoid a scene. She didn't handle stress well, she was not good in a crisis. He'd told her these things so many times that now, receiving the second most horrendous piece of news a woman can ever receive, she expected the top of her head to fly off and fireworks to shoot out of her skull, at least.

Instead, a dreadful calm descended and she heard herself say, "She's beautiful." Generous girl! Dick never deserved you. "But, Dick--she's married."

She spoke very gently, thinking Dick had gone temporarily insane and only needed a bit of understanding to nudge him back to his senses.

Remembering how often she'd seen the Hoffmans in public holding hands, she said, "You don't expect that she's going to ask Dane for a divorce, do you?"

He didn't bother to explain that the papers had already been filed, that the hearing was coming up in less than a month. He was not being careful of her feelings--he merely didn't care what she thought or how she took it. He just wanted her to leave his office.

"I hope so," he breathed with oh, such fervor, Sharon felt herself quite blown away.

On the way home, desperate and reckless, she committed an act of

unpremeditated rebellion: she pulled into the parking lot of Dairy Queen. It happened so suddenly, that she could hear the squealing brakes of the car behind her as she turned her wheel.

What about your diet? The voice of her conscience asks. The voice sounded exactly like Dick's.

Her conscience formed the automatic response: "I'll only have a small, plain cone!" Then, recognizing the significance of her act of defiance, she silenced her conscience. "Fuck off!" she murmured out loud.

Her conscience had never heard such language from Sharon before and, unable to process the meaning, shut down altogether.

She pulled the car close to the microphone to place her order, wondering why it was that her conscience spoke to her in Dick's voice. Shouldn't the voice in her head be her own? The man moved out over a year ago—who cared what he thought? If she wanted ice cream, she would have ice cream.

"One hot fudge brownie delight," she announced, putting her mouth close to the speaker. "And I'd like that with whipped cream and nuts, please." It was her own voice placing her own order, and it resonated throughout the little building, making everyone inside laugh.

A male voice, not Dick's, but very deep and thrilling replied, "One hot fudge brownie delight? That'll be two fifty-seven. Please pull around."

It was Mr. Dr. Blankenship. She was so startled to see him wearing a Dairy Queen uniform that she almost crashed the car into the side of the building. Dr. Blankenship had once told her her husband worked in human services, but she'd assumed he held some position at the university. She almost kept on driving, afraid that he'd frown disapprovingly and tell her she didn't need the ice cream.

But surely he wouldn't remember her. Months had passed since they'd last met on the elevator at school. No one ever remembered meeting her. For years she'd been accustomed to introducing herself to her father-in-law whenever she ran into him somewhere without Dick. She wouldn't remember herself if she'd been introduced at a party.

But Mr. Dr. Blankenship smiled broadly. "Sheila--no. Shonda? Sharon! Enjoy!" He picked up the whipped cream and really squirted it on.

Dane Hoffman might be the master builder of the leaning tower of pizza, but Mr. Dr. Blankenship handed Sharon the Eiffel Tower of hot fudge brownie delight sundaes.

Dick would've spooned off the whipped cream.

No--whipped cream would never have been an issue because in Dick's company she never would have ordered a sundae in the first place. He was not one to spoil her with little treats.

He'd said, "Enjoy!"

Dick would--well, why should she care any more what Dick would do?

She sat in her car in the parking lot and ate, hardly tasting a thing, burning with the humiliation. How they must have laughed at her, all this time. Marijayne had known more than she had about her own problems. She had seen, had watched, had measured her misery with cool eyes. Sharon felt violated, exposed, as though she'd just happened to glance out the window of a brightly-lit room and see a stranger looking back in at her from the dark. How long had the stranger been standing there watching? How much had they seen? What did they know?

She started going to Dairy Queen on a weekly basis, as if testing whether it would happen again. Would she have the nerve to ask for

something she didn't need, didn't feel that she deserved? Would he give it to her, or would he tell her off this time? Remind her of her hips, her children, of the people starving in the the third world? Would he laugh in her face?

But time and time again, whatever extravagant concoction she ordered, Mr. Dr. Blankenship threw in a little extra: another cherry, a double serving of nuts, an extra dollop of hot fudge. And always he was as heavy-handed with the whipped cream as she was with the bug spray on days when the fall-out from the bubble gum factory brought out the ants in droves.

Finally she got up the nerve to challenge him, to force him to recognize the obvious. "Look at me! I'm too fat!"

But he only shook his head and said, "In my country, every woman is exactly the right size. What does this mean, 'too fat'? "

She decided he must be one of those odd men who preferred large women. Dr. Blankenship was herself generously proportioned, and given to wearing bold patterns and floral prints that emphasized her wide hips.

Sometimes he took his break when she came and then they'd both eat sundaes or sodas or blizzards. They began working their way through the entire Dairy Queen menu.

He said he wanted to know all about her, but Sharon could scarcely believe that, so she put him off, asking instead about himself. "Tell me more about the Labatami. I want to know everything. The secret things we didn't cover in class."

Some of what he said enlightened her more about her own culture than his.

She learned, for instance, that he taught part time at the university and at two different community colleges, but the pay was low and the teaching assignments unpredictable, so he picked up part-time jobs like this one at

Dairy Queen to supplement his income. He'd worked as a bagger at Meijer and in the deli at Kroger's, where his exotic looks earned him the job of making sushi. "I pulled my hair back into a pony tail, very tight, to make me look Asian," he laughed and compared the trick to a girl wearing a push-up bra to create the illusion of cleavage.

She learned that, if Dr. Blankenship didn't get tenure next year, then they planned to go on the lecture circuit with music and dance and demonstrations of Labatami culture.

Sharon squirmed at the reference to the dance, remembering how she'd sobbed watching him. She hoped he hadn't noticed.

But she hadn't understood before how the tenure system works or the pecking order that exists among the faculty. Why should Dr. Blankenship be worried about getting tenure? She was a wonderful teacher! And why should anyone with a doctoral degree be bagging groceries or jerking sodas to make ends meet? Surely his gifts could be put to better use than that! But no. He'd applied for a variety of jobs and never got hired. He was unqualified for some and overqualified for others.

His hobby, he said, was making jewelry, incorporating emblems special to his people, such as the sacred horn and the golden humongo spider.

Ah, yes, the sacred horn....

She learned that the unemployment rate among Labatami women who have reared their children is zero percent, because they are prized for their intelligence, their wisdom and experience. Mothers never needed to work, of course--Sharon knew that from class. Every mother was revered as a minor deity within her family and in the village at large, bearing in her very body the physical image of the Goddess-made-woman (ancient Labatami redemption myth).

Stretch marks were a mark of beauty, sagging breasts a medal of honor.

A mother never went hungry or homeless. She never went without work: meaningful work, for the female gifts were too valuable to be wasted. The mothers and grandmothers pooled their wisdom to rear the children collectively.

"Like the collegiality of bishops," Sharon murmured. "It's a concept in the Catholic Church," she explained.

Mr. Dr. Blankenship shook his head. "Not the same. The bishops are all men. They lack female wisdom."

When Sharon referred to Labatami society as a matriarchy, Mr. Dr. Blankenship frowned. The male was just as highly valued, he said, and neither sex dominated the other.

"Long ago, the male was put on a pedestal and an entire code of conduct evolved by which boys and men were treated with an exaggerated respect. Many generations passed before they began to understand that this artificial courtesy really masked a system of repression. Men finally were given their rightful place in society alongside the women, and fathers, too, were afforded the respect they deserved.

Sharon asked if they had a problem with male mid-life crisis among the Labatami.

Mr. Dr. Blankenship said no. A man who left his wife and children must wear his horn about his neck as a sign of his cowardice and was thereafter shunned as a miserable pippe skwique. Many such men experienced a strange reversal of the sexual maturation process. Their voices returned to the high-pitched range of a boy and their beard and chest hair fell out.

Sharon asked if this might possibly be caused by physical means.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... you know... castration."

"Oh, no!" Mr. Dr. Blankenship laughed at the idea of hordes of marauding women who mutilate offending males. The strange emasculation had no physical cause, but perhaps a psychogenic one--so great was the stigma attached to being a pipsqueak. Generally the symptoms were thought to be induced by divine intervention.

The term "castrating bitch" did not exist in the Labatami language, while the words for "shrew," "nag," and "virago" had only masculine endings, as such words were never applied to women. The terms were pretty much archaic, anyway, since men had assumed more equality.

What about monogamy? Sharon knew the Labatami shared the same ideals as Americans profess, but wanted to hear Mr. Dr. Blankenship confirm it. Instead, he laughed. "We are all human, are we not? Sometimes we slip and fall." The integrity of the family was given higher priority than the integrity of the sexual bond.

"Divorce is a death blow to an entire society!" he declared. "Here is the epicenter," he said, holding open one hand and indicating the center of his palm, "and here the damage is the greatest. But there is destruction along the entire fault line, and the threat of instability and more destruction far into the future."

He expressed dismay over the divorce practices and statistics in the States and was puzzled that a greater onus attached to the partner who is cheated against than to the partner who cheated.

"Two things I've noticed that really bother me. From watching cop shows, one would think that most women in this country are prostitutes!" he

said. As for movies? "--that the greatest love stories involve a man and a woman who are married to other people! That silly film--" he gives a dismissive gesture, "--Bridge Over--whatever."

"Bridges of Madison County?"

"Exactly! Stupid! Wringing the audience's heart to convince them that the woman ignored a moral imperative by not leaving her farmer husband-- on the basis of what? A summer afternoon idyll. A picnic!" He shook his head in disgust. "How many people who saw that film began to look at their spouse like last week's meatloaf gone bad?"

"Clint Eastwood has never showed up at my back door, I can tell you that," Sharon said. Who played the husband, anyway? She couldn't even remember his face.

"Pippe skwiques and slyz bolls !" Mr. Dr. Blankenship cried, slipping into Labatami idiom and using the term for a woman who cheats on her husband or violates another woman's marriage.

Sharon was surprised at his vehemence. By now she understood completely that his intentions towards her were entirely honorable. Could she be as certain about her own? What would she do if he ever offered her something besides a little more whipped topping on her sundae? Having been deliberately shafted by another woman, she has vowed not to do it to anyone else, but what if Dr. Blankenship weren't her professor? Could she be absolutely sure that, if her grade and her very standing in school didn't depend upon it, she might not be open to the possibilities? Did she have in her heart the makings of a slyz boll?

"Oooh," Sharon murmured politely when he presented her with a necklace featuring an enormous pale gold spider, perfectly round in shape, its

eight legs all exactly the same length.

"Symbol of eternal life. The golden humongo moves around her web, like the sun around the sky."

"Or like God," Sharon said, nodding. "I don't mean to sound cynical."

They' were eating large chocolate marshmallow sundaes at a picnic table behind the building, not far from the dumpster. They had to shout to be heard over the noise from the air conditioner unit and swat away the hornets that had been drawn by the smell of food.

"No, no--finish your thought."

"I--I don't like spiders. There's something so cold-blooded about the way they sit there, just watching, while some poor fly gets all tangled up in their web. No sympathy. God isn't like that."

Mr. Dr. Blankenship laughed. "First you attack the spider by calling it cold-blooded and then you criticize it because it has no sympathy. A spider is neither fish nor man. It has neither blood nor sympathy. But you are right that God is not a spider, either. Maybe the comparison isn't entirely objectionable, however. I said the golden humongo is like the sun, but really, the sun only appears to move around the sky."

"I don't understand."

"The sun doesn't move, the earth does. We only perceive day and night as events which happen to us. But in reality the earth is moving, not the sun. The earth isn't passive after all. In the same way, we lose our perspective and blame God for causing the things which happen to us, things for which we are ourselves responsible."

"So the golden humongo only appears to move around its web."

"No, the golden humongo moves around the web--"

"Then you're saying that God doesn't make the web, and neither does

the spider. The fly makes the web."

"No..."

"Okay, so the fly tangles itself in the web--but it doesn't make the web, so whose fault is it?"

They argued about the nature of the web and the relationships among the spider and the fly and God and man and the sun and the earth and sunrise and got themselves tangled up in their own rhetoric. She has dined on far better fare in far more opulent surroundings, but rarely with such complete pleasure.

Then the hornet stung, in the joint between her thumb and index finger.

"Okay, whose fault was that?" she demanded, but laughed in spite of the pain. Mr. Dr. Blankenship herded her inside and tended to her thumb, applying a paste of meat tenderizer and water because an enzyme in papaya he said, is known to neutralize bee venom.

God is rather partial to spiders and did not mind Sharon's comparison. But unlike the "cold-blooded" spider of Sharon's analogy, God had compassion enough. And a sense of humor, as well. Take the matamata turtle of Suriname, for instance, that poises on one toe on a submerged rock and, scarcely daring to breathe, wiggles its little tongue like a stranded motorist on a deserted road, in the hopes of flagging down dinner. Its jaws thrown wide, its bumpy, log-like arms dangling helplessly, its leg stre-e-etched to the limits of amphibian endurance: with what aching patience it waits, hoping against hope for a morsel with which to delay starvation. The very posture of supplication. The matamata turtle at prayer bears some resemblance to a Sunday morning worshiper straining the limits of their

attention span to lift their thoughts to heaven.

The matamata turtle is poised to receive, but also to reach out and take. Just watch what it does when a juicy tidbit goes for the bait. Snap! Those jaws clamp down before the beetle knows what hit it. That's focus. Actively cooperating with grace. Unlike human suppliants, who wait for heaven to rain down favors just for the asking, but forget to follow through with a little effort on their own part.

The matamata puts on no airs, but bumps and all, speaks to God from where it lives, in the stinking mud of the river bank. The Catholics and the Methodists first put on their faces, then come to the altar to make their petitions. There, all the trappings thought to be proper to divinity: the flowers, the music, the solemnity--somehow take the edge off their need and give them a sense of entitlement. "Please, Lord," they say, and trust that their prayer will be heard. But it's not faith, or a confidence in God's mercy. It's not even a "Please, Dad, can I borrow the car?" kind of expectation. It's more insidious, an air of familiarity with the Divine and a sense that some reciprocity is due. Amen, amen I say unto you, there is more rejoicing in heaven over one matamata turtle poised on a mucky river rock than over ninety-nine well-fed Methodists--or Catholics, or Anglicans, or Lutherans--filing out after Sunday services, thinking the check is in the mail. Many times during a service God whiles away the time sending water beetles in the direction of those wiggling tongues barely visible in the river bed, while the prayers of the faithful go unanswered until they get off their knees and onto their toes and str-r-e-etch!

If God had been the one to design the Rev. Damschroder's membership brochure, it would've been a matamata turtle and not the Hoffman family featured on the cover.

Twenty

Dane was staying in the mobile home of a friend, a veterinarian who was in Boston doing post-graduate work at Tufts. He'd decided he wasn't ready to be neighbors with Marijayne. He couldn't imagine waving to Dick when they past on the street. Billy mentioned it one night after band practice when they'd gone out for a beer, and the guys were speechless. After a space of stunned silence, Gus Bonami let out a low whistle, while Ewan MacGregor balled his right hand into a fist and shook it. Guill Bedford IV knocked the palm of one hand against his head as if he'd heard wrong.

"That's just nuts. Either they have no shame or else they have no conscience. It's so... disrespectful of your parents," he said.

Ewan sniffed. "'Disrespectful?' Not my choice of words for it," he said.

Billy told them that their parents now kept the drapes drawn in the living room all the time so they didn't have to look at the house across the street.

Gus was the first to laugh. "It's so awful, it's funny," he said.

They started cracking jokes.

"You can have backyard barbecues together on the weekends in the summer," Gus said.

"You and Dick can watch the Superbowl together and let Marijayne bring you snacks," said Guill.

"You can ask Dick to borrow his monkey wrench. Then add, 'Oh, yeah--and do you mind if I take Marijayne home with me for an hour, too?'"

Even Dane was laughing now, and it felt good.

"What would I do without you guys?" he said.

The little trailer was a far cry from the house on Grand Boulevard, but it suited his self-scrutinizing mood. There was nowhere to hide: nary a ruffle nor a knickknack to be found. Marty, the veterinarian who was a friend of a friend, preferred clean lines, uncluttered surfaces. The trailer was small: he could almost reach across from one wall to the other. When he rolled over in bed, he was sure he felt the whole trailer roll and pitch. He liked to lie in bed and listen to the rain on the roof and imagine himself at sea.

Everything was compact and easy to access. He cooked packaged ramen noodles in the little microwave and rinsed off his fork in the little sink. He made his coffee in a two-cup Mr. Coffee unit mounted under the single kitchen cabinet. He only had two sets of clothes because the closet was full of his friend's things. The rest of his own clothes were at his parents' house, though he was missing some things, like the cashmere sweater Marijayne gave him last Christmas. Maybe she'd taken it for Dick. Dane washed his clothes in the apartment-sized combination washer-and-dryer unit squeezed in between the refrigerator and the half-bath. There was a portable television, but he only got the local channel because Marty canceled the cable. Whatever program was being shown was the one he watched.

He was glad not to have to make any decisions. He felt like Gulliver, or Alice in Wonderland, suddenly thrust into a foreign world he can't navigate. He bumped his knees and elbows everywhere. His days were filled with "Bangs!" and "Ows!" His perceptions were all off, but oddly enough, his perspective seemed to be that of someone whose lack of statures prevents them from seeing the whole picture.

Even in such narrow digs, his days soon began to feel unwieldy and wobbly. He could only deal with one thing at a time. He made his coffee.

He cooked his ramen noodles. He rinsed his fork. He washed his shirt and underwear from yesterday. He watched the local weather forecast.

In short, he developed a routine. He structured his time.

Sometimes the narrow space felt too confining, like a bulky sweater on a day that suddenly turns warm. Unable to get comfortable in the built-in recliner that converted into a writing desk, he tried turning himself around so that his legs were over his head. The rush of blood to his brain provided momentary relief. But then he felt like an over term infant stuck in the birth canal.

At least his mind was free to wander miles, galaxies from the trailer. Some days it traveled no further than to his parents' house. In his mind, he sat on the glider on the front porch, as he'd sat so often as a boy, and looked at the great houses across the street. Other times his wandering took him to the clinic, the emblem of his success as much as his failure. All was not lost! He could get back his career. The time had past, his suspension was over. He only needed to take some continuing education classes to have his license reinstated. But he did nothing about it. How could he, when even in his imagination he was unable to open the front door and go inside his clinic?

He decided to push himself, little by little, every day a bit further, one day putting his hand on the door latch, the next day pressing the lever to release the latch, the third day opening the door far enough to feel the rush of warm air and hear the barking from the kennels in back—all of this happening in his mind. On the fourth day, he pushed open the door far enough to take one step inside. And what was it that he first laid eyes on?

The reception desk.

And sitting behind the desk? Lorraine, of course.

He hadn't thought of Lorraine in weeks. But now it all came back: the

pizza they'd fought over like animals, the frenzied passion in the operating room while poor Dr. Brodsky single-handedly dealt with an infestation of fleas.

He remembered how for days afterward he couldn't get her out of his mind. They'd hounded each other. Emotion had nothing to do with it. It had been entirely physical. He couldn't excuse himself, he'd never thought of it as love. They hadn't made love, they'd mated. It had felt like a knee-jerk reaction, an itch that needed scratching. He'd never approached Marijayne for mere sex, but he'd helped himself to Lorraine as if she were a Coke. A twenty-ounce bottle, solid but shapely and oh, how it burned to slake his thirst!

He must have wounded her terribly.

Or not.

She'd been just as violent, just as lacking in tenderness. She'd bit him--hard--on both ears! She'd bunched up his shirt to reach his bare back and clawed him with her razor-sharp nails.

It was as though they'd been bewitched, though the scientist in him balked at the notion.

Given: a sudden onset of symptoms, many of them severe

Given: behavior unusual in both of them

Given: gradual improvement without medical intervention

Hypothesis: an infection of possibly viral or maybe bacterial origin.

Source: ?

As his mother had so often said, maybe it was something they ate.

They'd begun to display symptoms minutes after sharing the pizza on which he'd crumbled what he was pretty sure was microwaved chunks of Sweetie's heart.

He spun himself right side up and leaped from the recliner. He felt like himself again, the man of science and compassion, full of projects and the energy to complete them. He shared a tin of sardines with Botticelli, Marty's cat, then got in his Jeep and drove to the clinic.

He approached the door with the same dread he'd felt when he'd tried to imagine this moment, and he took it step by step, also as he'd imagined: first a hand on the door, and so forth, until he felt the rush of warm air, heard the yapping dogs, and saw, at her reception desk, Lorraine.

"I want to apologize, Lorraine," he began, then stopped.

She was staring at him with a baleful look.

He didn't bother to finish his apology. "I just came to get some things," he said. Then he walked into the back and set to work. He didn't know what to take: he'd have to run a number of experiments on a variety of animals and body parts. He looted the freezer, not bothering to read the labels. He stuffed some ten plastic bags into a duffel bag. Then he rifled the cabinets, pulling out petri dishes and beakers from one supply cabinet and bottles of tincture of this and tincture of that from another. He worked quickly, unsure how he'd explain if Lorraine walked in and saw him. But she must be avoiding him. Perhaps she was afraid of him, or maybe afraid of herself.

On the way home to the little trailer, he stopped at a medical supply house and picked up a microscope, some slides, a Bunsen burner and other equipment that no home laboratory should be without. Lastly he stopped at Fr' Angelico's for a couple of carryout pizzas with shrimp and anchovies-- what else could he feed a cat named Botticelli?

He drove home with a pleasant anticipation he hadn't felt since his first year of veterinary school. He stood outside the trailer for a full minute,

taking in the sky, the trees in the distance, the plastic bird bath next door with the plastic deer drinking from it. Then he went inside, shut the trailer door and locked himself in.

Some mysteries were beyond the scope of his knowledge and expertise. He might never understand, for example, why Marijayne fell out of love with him. He would never know the exact cause of Sweetie' death. But other mysteries might yield up their secrets. What might have caused the peculiar attraction he and Lorraine had felt for one another? And was it possible, using other tissue, to produce the same result again? Humming, he prepared slides, slicing the thinnest possible cross-sections of tissue and fixing them to the glass plates, then studying them under the microscope. He poured chemical solutions into a beaker, dropped in a small bit of tissue and swirled it like an oenophile at a wine-tasting, observing the results. He'd forgotten how satisfying medical research could be. In many ways, it was a lot like cooking.

"Ah-ha!" he crowed now and then and made copious notes in a spiral notebook.

He worked until late in the night, forgetting even to eat or go to the bathroom. Finally he grew aware of the pain in his back from stooping long over his test tubes and vials and the weariness of his eyes from peering through his microscope. He left off his work and glanced around.

The trailer looked like a crime scene. It was worse than the most frantic shift at the pizza place, though the drips of blood and globs of tissue clinging everywhere bore an uncanny resemblance to the tomato sauce and bits of raw dough that adhered to the counters after a Friday night's baking.

"Either he's insane, or he's a genius," he told Marty, wondering why

he was speaking of himself in the third person.

He left the mess for morning, having only enough energy left to walk the three feet between the kitchen sink and the door that housed the pull-down bed. He collapsed onto the mattress with his clothes on.

Then, as happens when one is over-tired, he couldn't sleep.

Perhaps if he read a bit, he could relax.

He turned on the small bedside lamp which was too big for the tiny pine bookcase that served as a nightstand. Without getting out of bed, he could peruse the titles on the small bookshelf. He'd like to sink his teeth into a juicy scientific treatise, but found only *Women Who Triumph in the Face of Divorce*, *Codependent No More* and a couple titles by Dr. Laura Schlesinger. *How Could You Do That?* screamed the cover of one paperback. *Ten Stupid Things Women Do To Mess-Up Their Lives* lamented another. He'd never realized how disturbed his friend Vicky was.

And she'd gotten accepted at Tufts?

There were two novels as well: *War and Peace* and *Frankenstein*. He selected *Frankenstein*. It was much shorter than the Tolstoy, and it's about a doctor, after all--albeit a madman and not a veterinarian.

He was out of practice reading novels, and at first, the words wobbled before his eyes in the forty-watt lamplight, but soon the rows of sentences flow smoothly along and he gathered speed.

He quickly developed a sympathy for Dr. Frankenstein and his project.

...Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed?

It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not

restrain our inquiries. I revolved these circumstances in my mind and determined thenceforth to apply myself more particularly to those branches of natural philosophy which relate to physiology.

He followed Victor Frankenstein into the vaults and charnel-houses from which the living naturally recoil. He stared at death through three pair of eyes: his own, Mary Shelley's, and Victor's, and "saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain."

So vivid was the prose that he imagined the stench of decay seemed to come from the very trailer—which, come to think of it, it did.

Marty had come in through the open window and was picking her way gingerly over the cluttered, gore-smeared counter, but Dane paid scant heed, aware only of a generalized slinking in his peripheral vision.

Mary Shelley, a hundred and fifty years dead, worked her genius still, and galvanized Dane's long torpid imagination to life. One moment, Dane watched Victor Frankenstein at the autopsy table staring bravely at death. And the next moment, he got up off the bed like a sleepwalker and, novel in hand, stared down at the mattress as if at a body stretched out in death. Dr. Hoffman was Dr. Frankenstein.

As in a dream, where objects or people can be more than one thing, the body he stared at was that of a little dog, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Marijayne.

I paused, examining and analyzing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life, until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me—a light so brilliant and wondrous, yet so simple....After days and

nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.

Every doctor dreams of eradicating disease and flouting death. Easy enough, then, for Dane to overlook Victor's obvious insanity. He quivered with excitement, convinced that he could see the merest flutter of fur at Sweetie's muzzle, the twitch of Marijayne's tender lips.

The page break at the end of chapter four brought him back to reality. He looked about him, blinking, convinced that he was on the brink of something wonderful. He was sweating profusely, and hungry. To get food, he must go into the kitchen. One glance in that direction sent shudders down his spine.

No one gets through years of medical training with a queasy stomach, however, though the sight of Marty vigorously licking at a spot on the counter does give him chills. He sprinted to the refrigerator and pulled out the second pizza. The shreds of mozzarella looked crusty, the tomato sauce had hardened into splotches, but he won't be sick like a first year med student. He ate it cold, standing at the open refrigerator, tearing off bits and feeding them to Marty. Then he scurried back to bed, stepping lightly, the floor cold under his feet.

Chapter 5. It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the

creature open....

His own brown eyes fluttered shut, overcome by sheer exhaustion. Only once during the rest of the night did he startle awake to see yellow eyes peering over him, but of course it was only Marty.

He wakened to bright sunshine and a sense of well-being he hadn't felt in months. Blood on his lab coat, gore on the countertop, drips of tissue on the walls, spatters on the floor: all's right with the world! The shame of Sweetie's death, the loss of his license, the stint as a pizza chef, even the divorce: blessings in disguise, leading to--this!

Two cups of strong coffee fortified him to get back to work.

Many long hours later, Dane stepped outside of his trailer/laboratory, haggard and stubbled, and stretched out on the grass next to the propane hook-up. "Eureka," he whispered weakly to a spider that scrambled across the arm he'd flung across his eyes. The day's experiments had culminated in a startling event which he now relived in his mind.

Not thirty minutes ago, Marty had knocked over a beaker and, before Dane could prevent her, she'd lapped up a bit of the brownish liquid distilled from a small bit of tissue taken from the spleen of a laboratory retriever--all right, "broth." Moments after consuming the substance, Marty seemed to undergo a change in personality. She leaped from the counter onto Dane's back and draped herself across his shoulders, then licked his ear with her prickly tongue, making the hair on the nape of his neck rise up and producing an electrifying sensation. He gently knocked her off onto a chair, but a few minutes later, she was right back up on his shoulders, purring into his ear. This happened again and again, and finally he realized she'd licked a layer of epithelial cells right off his neck! Thinking she might be hungry, he

tore off a piece of pizza crust from last night's leftovers and offered it to her. She took it in her mouth and held it out toward him as if she were trying to feed him.

Lying on the grass now, safe from Marty's advances--she was securely shut up inside the trailer, though he could hear her barking pitifully to get out--yes, barking. He wondered what might happen if the effect didn't wear off, and poor Marty continued to pursue him like a love-sick puppy. With his luck, Vicky would come back from Tufts and sue him for alienation of affection. Marty scratched at the door, jumped up onto the window sill, banged her head against the glass--he'd been careful to close the window so she couldn't get out. Then she disappeared from view. The whole trailer shook as she apparently raced from one end to the other and, from the sound of it, threw herself against the door. Again and again she repeated this behavior until Dane gave in and dragged himself to his feet. He had no choice but go back inside the trailer before the stupid cat knocked herself out.

Poor Marty. The moment she saw the object of her passion, she sprang at him, wagging her tail violently and licking his face with slobbering tongue.

Dane fended her off with hands, elbows, knees--the term "wolf" had long gone out of usage to describe a predatory human male making unwelcome advances to a female, but he understood now what sexual harassment was all about. He easily lured Marty outside, then scrambled back inside the trailer and slammed shut the door right in her lovesick little face.

All night long, she'd kept him awake, baying like--well, a dog.

Next morning, she was back to her old self: independent, disdainful. When he tried to stroke her, she hissed and batted him with one paw, nails

poised to scratch. But on the step lay the mangled bodies of a mouse, a mole, and a robin, all of which she'd apparently slain and brought back as tokens of affection. Dane was aghast at Marty's brutality. The mouse was still alive, waving its little limbs feebly. He lifted it gently and carried it inside to treat its wounds: a long scratch on the belly, another on its little head--an entire ear was missing. He set the mouse on a paper towel in lieu of sterile sheet and cleaned it with cotton balls moistened with disinfectant. The poor creature squirmed itself free and ran, chattering, across the counter and disappeared behind the microwave oven. No doubt Marty would find it and finish her work. Along with everything else, Dane would have a mouse on his conscience.

He set to work cleaning up the kitchen, and as he worked, he wondered what direction to take his research next. What, in fact, had he found? He was hardly aware when Marty pranced back into the room and began circling the small area between kitchen and bed. Around and around she went. Something about her loping movements reminded him of the pony ride at the county fair, where some poor pony hitched to a central pole was made to go round and round, while a succession of city kids sat uneasy in the saddle, digging their knees and heels into the poor pony's sides. Dane glanced at Marty and saw that the wounded mouse perched on her back, bouncing up and down like a tenderfoot. When the mouse started to list to one side, Marty shifted the weight of the mouse on her back and continued to circle the floor.

What had produced this transformation? Had they perhaps gotten into the distillation somehow? Maybe some of it had dripped onto the floor. It wouldn't take much. What else could have happened that the two were suddenly the best of friends? When Marty tired of playing pony, she

popped down in a square of sunlight and the mouse groomed her fur. Soon they were dozing peacefully. It wasn't exactly the lion laying down with the lamb, but it was enough to make Dane feel a little like St. Francis of Assisi.

The effect was only temporary, however. As the chemical wore off, hisses and snarls replaced the happy squeaks and loud purring, and Dane scooped up the poor mouse just as Marty was about to gore it with bared claw.

This could be big.

It was time to take his experiments out of the trailer and into a real laboratory. And no more testing on animals--animals had rights. It was time to test the substance on human subjects. Dane collected the remaining distillation into one bottle and secured it with a lid.

He confided the results of his tests to his pals in the alumni band: the experiments, the distillation, the strange effects it seemed to have on Marty and the mouse.

At first they didn't know what to say.

"You're kidding, of course," brother Billy said quietly.

They were all looking at him funny.

"You cut up animal parts in your friend's trailer and--what?"

"They were dead animals," Dane objected. "I didn't kill any more little doggies!" His voice broke and Billy soothed him with a hand on his shoulder.

After a moment, Ewan MacGregor, the high school teacher, broke the spell. Things were getting too creepy for him and it was time to lighten them up. He began calling Dane "Oberon."

"A role I played me very self sophomore year, you may recall."

No one did.

Ewan took a long drag on his brew, then set down the mug and collected himself, then adopted a theatrical pose and declaimed:

"Fetch me that flow'r; the herb I showed thee once.

The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid

Will make or man or woman madly dote

Upon the next live creature that it sees."

They looked at him with the same funny look they'd given Dane moments ago. Their looks said that he was a funny guy--not funny "ha-ha," but funny "strange." Part bar fly, part poet. They couldn't figure him out.

"The devil can quote Scripture to suit his purposes, eh, mates?" piped Gus Bonami finally.

Everyone laughed and joined the others in the bar who were applauding and whistling Ewan's performance.

"Really, Dane--you ought to bottle the stuff and sell it as an aphrodisiac!" Ewan laughed.

"I'd buy it!" Guil Bedford offered, and others did, too.

"Dr. Hoffman's Magic Elixir!"

"What? I didn't hear--" a little guy at the bar turned and wanted to know "What's it good for?"

Someone explained that Dane just invented a sort of "love juice."

Dane wished he'd never mentioned his distillation. They were turning it into a sideshow.

But Ewan MacGregor distracted him by reminding him how, in Shakespeare's play, Titania the queen of the fairies had fallen in love with an ass after Puck applied the nectar of a certain flower to her eyes.

"Not an ass, you ass," interrupted Gus. "It was Bottom, she fell in love with. He was only wearing the head of an ass."

Ewan shrugged. "A fine distinction."

"I don't see any distinction at all," Billy said quietly. "Marijayne fell in love with an ass, too, didn't she?" They all laughed, but Dane.

Guil Bradford pulled out a cigar and lit it. "Seriously," he said. "How do you do it?"

"How do I do what?" Dane asked.

"Everyone else has something to say about Dick Hedstrom but you. I've watched you. His name comes up and you don't even bat an eye. Me? I'd have plenty to say. I admire you. I couldn't be that way."

Dane didn't know what to say. He didn't understand it himself. Maybe it was because they did make jokes. Maybe they said it all for him. It made him feel good, though, to seem to rise above it.

That night he pondered the nature of loyalty, of devotion, of love. Is that all it was, chemistry? The stories you heard about dogs charging through burning houses to waken their masters, or running miles over ice and snow to get help for an injured child: such stories had always given him faith. Was it only a knee-jerk response? And what about human love and commitment? People talked about "chemistry" to describe their attraction, but he'd always wanted to believe it was only figurative language. When Marijayne stopped loving him was it only because some enzyme balance was out of whack?

Something someone said earlier at the bar tonight came back to him, something about having the means to make Marijayne fall in love with him again.

Was is possible? Could it be as easy as slipping a bit of the golden elixir into a drink and watching her hard brown eyes soften, melt like chocolate?

Would he want her under those circumstances?

Probably.

He couldn't think about it. He got busy and did now what few men before him had been known to do: he cleaned up the mess he made in the kitchen.

The next day, he moved his carton of belongings into his parents' house.

Twenty-One

While their parents' energies were thus absorbed by such fascinating concerns as surfing the menu at DQ, exploring each others' bodies in order to achieve a meeting of the minds, and performing experiments on tissue samples taken from dead dogs, the Hedstrom and Hoffman children responded in different ways. The Hoffman girls, three peas in a pod, put on a brave front that all was well. They possessed their mother's naturally cheerful disposition and were inclined to optimism. Every cloud had a silver lining. Oh, they hurt inside, but their mother nursed their spirits. They took their cue from her own positive attitude. Dick observed the difference between his lover's and his ex-wife's moods these days as evidence of Sharon's bad nature. Perhaps it was natural that Marijayne should be so upbeat and Sharon quite the opposite. She, after all, stood to gain a great deal from their new circumstances. But Dick blamed Sharon for the problems their children now developed.

In the space of a single grading period, Hunter managed to drop his GPA from a 3.5 to a 1.75--no mean feat. He had to quit the track team in order to do it because it required that he lie on his bed staring at the ceiling for long hours, while angry music set the air molecules in his room vibrating at levels high enough to break down the protective walls of his cells and alter the DNA.

Sharon decided he needed discipline, and as she didn't seem able to supply it, she sent him down to live with Dick.

One evening, Hunter came home to Dad's house with his Plumpy

Burger meal and large drink, and found Mrs. Hoffman's van parked in the drive. He knew the van—he'd seen it often enough, parked half on the drive and half on the lawn, with the wheels turned at a crazy angle. But never this late. No one was in the living room or the kitchen, and the house was dark. But going upstairs to his room, he heard voices in Dick's bedroom.

"Dad?" he called.

It suddenly got very quiet, but the light went on suddenly.

He went into his own room and closed the door.

A few minutes later there was a soft knock. It wasn't like Dad to knock like that, but he was surprised anyway to open the door and find Mrs. Hoffman standing there, wearing fresh lipstick and giving off an odor like Lysol.

"Your Dad isn't feeling well, Wolfe. I just came by to check on him," she said.

"It's Hunter," he said, and shot her his best cynical smile to let her know he wasn't dumb.

He grew his hair to shoulder-length, then dyed it black. His father seemed not to notice.

He decided to dye it white and phoned Sharon for advice. "Oh, Hunter," she said, sighing. "Don't do it. Read Wordsworth instead. You'll feel so much better."

An hour later, she glanced up from her Norton Anthology to see a wild man moving quickly across the lawn towards the house, tall and gangly, with the mane of a lion that's maybe seen a ghost, all white with streaks of orange.

The wild man spoke with Hunter's voice. He sounded desperate.

"Mom, you've got to help me! I'm meeting Sonja in an hour."

Being in school herself, Sharon had a tolerance for blue hair, nose rings, and tattoos, but she had no idea what to tell him. She was too busy now to figure out a real solution to his problem--there was another midterm this week and a paper, besides--so she told Hunter his hair looked cool all streaked and wild like that and sent him away.

Apparently Sonja thought he looked cool, too, because she talked Hunter into taking her to the Worm Feast concert in Detroit next month. Dick readily gave Hunter the money for tickets, which he wouldn't have done, if he'd been thinking clearly, but his mind was elsewhere these days.

"Worm Feast?" Sharon couldn't believe Dick had given their son permission, although her voice betrayed both outrage and a certain gloating. It was pleasant to catch one's ex being stupid.

The self-righteous attitude passed back and forth between them these days like a traveling trophy. Each thought the other guilty of neglect and moral turpitude, but that they personally did an admirable job of keeping the children's well-being foremost in mind. In truth, under the circumstances, neither of them could. Dick didn't have to contend with job issues--his career as juris doctor was well-established, and business had picked up since assuming the honorable mantle of city law director. He was raking in a rich harvest after years of hard work, and heaven knew he needed a large income now that he was about to take on more dependents. Sharon, however, found herself spiraling downward with the economy, and it didn't make her feel any better about it to be in the company of career specialists and executives whose companies had down-sized or gone global. Middle-aged workers were not hot properties. She didn't know if graduate school was the

answer or a face lift. One thing was certain: she was not getting hired with her degree. While virtually every job ad in the Evening Howl called for someone with "excellent communication skills, written and verbal," no one seemed to think a B.A. in English indicative of possessing such skills. If only Dr. Boering, her sociology professor, could see her now, she thought. She was finally becoming worthy of his interest as she drifted down, down, down from her position in the bourgeois middle class. One day he might leave his downtown apartment with panoramic view of the city to walk his bouchon frissé, accepting the deferential tip of the hat from the door man, and entering the park, lo--Sharon on her park bench with her worldly belongings in plastic bags bearing the seal of Michigan State, V.C. and the bookstore logo.

She devoured the classified ads daily, sent out graduate school applications, took classes at the community college in databases and spreadsheets. In short, she covered all her bases--except one. She refused to take Verna's advice that she join a bowling league or church where she might hook up with some retiree with a good pension who was attracted to her sturdy pair of--

"Verna!"

--"I was going to say biceps." It was no secret that Delbert worked her hard, and her job would only get more strenuous the older he got and the more care he needed.

"Could you put in a word for me at the Hot Tamale?" Sharon asked.

"They wouldn't hire you--you're overqualified," Verna said with a bit of a "told you so" in her voice. She knew that Sharon considered a restaurant job as a last resort and she didn't appreciate it. She missed her job--she'd been good at it. But she was a lawyer's wife now, and a lawyer's wife did not

work wait staff at a fast food establishment. Which was all right, too. She'd acquired enough self-importance by association with her respected husband the attorney to believe she was a bit better than other women.

She asked Mr. Dr. Blankenship if he could get her work at Dairy Queen.

The Blankenships were leaving town. Dr. Blankenship had been denied tenure after all. They were proceeding with Plan B: the lecture tour. They invited Sharon to come along as a public relations consultant.

It was a simple decision. A job. What was she any more but a ghost haunting her old life? Desperate to get away from Vieux Chien, where every day she had her nose rubbed in the mess of her life, Sharon agreed.

Of course Hannah and Wolfe would go with her. The college environment would rub off on them and have a salutary effect. Hannah had begun hanging out with kids Sharon didn't know, some of them from broken homes--like her own, but still, that couldn't be good. You might expect single mothers to rally round each other and offer mutual support, but no. They don't trust each other any more than married couples trust them. Hannah's grades had dropped--nothing like Hunter's, but she occasionally smelled like cigarettes. Sharon saw a complete change of environment as the only possible solution. But she couldn't send Hannah to live with Dick because Hunter might be a bad influence now. No, Hannah and Wolfe would go with her. They'd see that the world offered so much more besides the bubble gum festival. Dolly was gone from the nest and wouldn't be upset if Sharon sold the family home, and Hunter had one year left at V.C. High. She gave him the choice to come with her or stay. She tried not to influence his decision.

Now that she was leaving, her small circle of supporters cheered her

decision. They marveled at what they saw as her resiliency. "I couldn't leave. I couldn't start all over again in a completely new place," Margaret said, and Elaine added, "I admire you so much!" Randi Fitz, whose counsel she still depended upon as much as her friendship, felt a move would be good for her and not bad for the kids, either. Her lawyer, her realtor, her fellow non-traditional student and comrade from her days in the hallowed halls of MSU-V.C. Pearl Bailey—all rallied round her, revealing the depths of their own restlessness tempered by indecisiveness—or maybe instinctive good sense. Sharon let them pommel her back and shore up her own doubts. She could make this work. The Blankenships assured her they intended to limit their travels to the Midwest. She would never be more than a day's drive from meeting Dick so he could have the children for the weekend.

The only glitch came when Hunter announced that he had decided to stay with Dick. Sharon hadn't expected it. Her own plans were in motion, it seemed impossible to back out. Hannah and Wolfe seemed to look forward to the move. The Blankenships insisted they were counting on her.

Dolly, college freshman, felt her parents' divorce as if it were her own. She broke up with her boy friend before he had a chance to dump her. She was taking women's studies and rallied round her mother, whom she saw in a struggle to overcome the legacy of centuries of misogyny on a worldwide scale. Young girls sold into prostitution, rape victims put to death like so much garbage, female genital mutilation: Dolly brought all her outrage over such third world atrocities and transferred it to Sharon's plight. On the telephone, she cheered Sharon's decision to go on the road with the Blankenships, then hung up and cried her eyes out.

"My mother is selling the house I grew up in!" she told her roommate.

"It feels like she's taking it all back: the marriage, the kids, everything! It's like none of us ever existed."

She had no words to describe her feelings for her father, who really had betrayed her as much as he had Sharon. She couldn't have a conversation with him. She tried, but the effort of smoothing out her voice so that none of the anger and pain registered nearly did her in. She was afraid that if he knew how she felt, that he would desert her, too. She was sure it would back up in her system somehow and bring her heart and lungs grinding to a halt. She felt pregnant with rage. It sucked the oxygen from her cells, and drained the blood from her veins. It kicked violently, leaving her insides black and blue. If it didn't kill her now, then one day she would labor and bring forth a monster of untold size and power and it would seize her up and bite her head off.

In the midst of all this came finals. She got a "care package" of snacks and fruit and a note of encouragement signed, "Love, Mom and Dad." She put it out in the hall with a sign: "Free." (Later she went back and pulled out the M&Ms.) Her roommate told her to go see her professors and ask for an extension, but she didn't figure she'd get it. This stuff happened all the time. If your grandparents didn't die freshman year, your parents split up.

College freshmen traditionally were welcomed home for Christmas break like conquering heroes and spent the semester break in the clouds sporting with gods. Everyone was so glad to see them, so proud. They looked in the mirror and saw that they had changed. They felt superior. Even the old sibling antipathies seemed beneath them now. If they were lucky, the break was short enough not to rob them of their illusions.

But what family is traditional any more? Certainly not Dolly's. Delbert never could tolerate self-confidence in any of his grandchildren,

anyway, so it was no surprise that his first remark concerned Dolly's pink and black hair. His second was, "Did you make the dean's list?"

Verna grossed everyone out with the way she kept teasing Grandpa and putting her arms around him, which you could see embarrassed him. The whole family knew they had separate bedrooms, so what was the point of this performance?

Her parents put on a show of normality that was as phony as Dolly's pink hair. Then they undercut the normality by saying weird things. Mom had gone out of her way to make it a special Christmas: decorations, cookies, gifts—the works. She kept saying how this would be the last Christmas in their old house in that tone parents use that says, "I really mean it." As for Dad, Dolly wondered if he were on drugs because his responses were just plain odd. He came for Christmas dinner, and looked like a different person. Gone were the sagging jeans and flannel shirt of previous holidays. He looked depressingly preppy in khaki slacks and button down shirt and sweater.

He looked like Dr. Hoffman, only shorter by about half a foot.

He had gifts for everyone, even Sharon. A tin of popcorn. And at the end of the meal he really kissed her, in full view of everyone. Hannah got all excited and took this as a sign that they were getting back together. Sharon maybe thought so, too, because her whole face lit up. It was pathetic.

Then the doorbell rang, and Dolly hoped it would be some friend to rescue her from this fetid family circle.

It was Chuck Upton, laden with gifts and looking decidedly like a wannabe, though a wannabe what Dolly couldn't exactly decide.

He came in all nervous-looking, and when he saw Dick, his face changed. Talk about surprise. He started stuttering and making excuses like

he was embarrassed, and after setting the presents in a heap on the leather recliner, he left.

Mother's cheeks were the same shade as the placemats, while Dad registered nada. Clearly he thought Chuck had come over to see *him*.

But then he said he had to go, too. Marijayne was waiting dinner for him and her whole family would be there. He got on his jacket, then stood in the middle of the living room with his gloves in one hand and a silly smile on his face.

"Say, would you mind awfully if I took this table?" He motioned with his gloves at the little end table he'd made Sharon years ago. "We decided we'd like to have it, after all. You don't mind, do you? I mean, it's all right with you if I--?" He was already removing the lamp and family Bible from the table with the air of a grown son looting the attic for castoffs for his first apartment.

And Sharon seemed fondly maternal as she took the Bible from him and said, "No, no--go ahead. You made it," though Dolly could see that this was a blow.

She followed her father out to the front door and watched him carry the table down the snow-covered steps. She couldn't make up her mind if she wanted him to fall or not.

"You know Mr. Upton came over to see Mom, don't you?" she called out and closed to the door in his startled face.

After Dick left, Delbert and Verna did, too. Sharon disappeared into the kitchen to clean up and Dolly followed her.

"I can do this. You go relax," Sharon insisted. She looked upset, but clearly wasn't going to talk about it, the Goddess be praised.

Dolly went upstairs to Hannah's room for their first real conversation

ever.

The day of the Worm Feast concert arrived. Dick and Sharon sent their elder children off in the van with their dates, Sonja and Le, and a cooler filled with Cokes and sandwiches, as if they were heading for the zoo on a class trip. Detroit was only an hour away--and they had a good map.

They stood like an old married couple, arm in arm, waving.

"Call if you have any problem!" they both yelled.

But there wouldn't be any problems.

The minute the van turned out of the drive, Dick dropped his hand from his ex-wife's shoulder and she brushed off the spot as if he'd left a residue. He left without another word.

Who was this woman carrying a butcher knife inside her jacket as she made her way down the street in the dead of night towards her ex-husband's love nest, moving from shadow to shadow, deliberately avoiding the light cast by the street lamps?

Sharon had tried to telephone Dick to no avail. The answering machine kept picking up on the third ring. She called again and again, hanging up each time just before the recording kicked on, but Dick was apparently sleeping too soundly to hear a thing. Nothing like good wine and good sex to knock a man out and make him sleep like a baby. But Sharon didn't know about the wine or the sex. There was no alternative but for her to go over to his house and wake him up. She couldn't deal with this by herself. She didn't even have the car--Dolly and Hunter took the van with them.

So she grabbed her jacket and, for protection, the butcher knife--Who

may be prowling the quiet residential streets of Vieux Chien at two in the morning, stalking a lone female?--then let herself out the back door to make her way down to Dick's house to tell him that their children, along with Dolly's boyfriend Le, had been arrested for underage drinking. She hoped that Hannah and Wolfe would be all right alone for the time being.

The front door of Dick's house was unlocked, as she knew it would be, for Hunter, who should have been home an hour ago and might have been if he had not been arrested.

Sharon set down the knife on the table by the front door, then tiptoed up the stairs so as not to disturb the man she had come to waken. Pausing outside his closed bedroom door, and knocking softly, whispering hoarsely, "Dick!"

Finally, a creaking floor board, and then he cracked open the door, clutching his pajama top to his chest with the absurd impression of modesty guarded.

"What do you want?" he asked. All she can see is one eye, but that eye is darting everywhere. Did he think she's going to jump his bones, or maybe just kill him?

Sharon explained as gently as possible that the kids were in jail in Pontiac, and apologizing repeatedly for waking him with such bad news. Dick took it quite well and they discussed quite calmly what was to be done.

He would go back to bed so he can be fresh in the morning, and she would return home and wait up for Sonja, who was returning with the van. Dick would watch Hannah and Wolfe while she drove to Pontiac to post bail and bring the kids back home. Somehow it made sense--maybe because it was three in the morning and she hadn't slept a wink all night.

"Thank goodness you're a lawyer and know what should be done," she said.

Downstairs, Sharon retrieved the butcher knife. Making no attempt to conceal the knife, she returned home with a sense of purpose.

Sophie Davenport, unable to sleep because of a gallbladder attack, saw Sharon leave Dick's house and in the streetlight, saw the glint of metal and wondered what to do. She The neighbors were convinced that Sharon was crazy and dangerous. Why doesn't she leave him alone and get on with her life?

Twenty-Two

The cell phone connection was bad, but Marijayne was pretty sure Dane was saying that he had the papers from his lawyer. "Do you want to stop by and sign them after work?"

At long last, freedom--and with the wedding fast approaching, none too soon. She was eager to finalize the divorce and put this thirty-year blip of poor judgment behind her, this sham marriage. She could look ahead and concentrate on making herself new for Dick, that is, virginal. She could do that, of course she could. If she could manage to bring about the fulfillment of what was once only a wild dream--a passing fancy, really, in the beginning--then she could do anything. God was clearly on her side, their side--just see how He'd knocked over each possible obstacle like so many bowling pins: Sharon, Dane, the children, their families, friends. Even the Rev. Damschroder had agreed to perform the marriage ceremony. And it was important to her that she be married in the church, although, if it had come to it, she'd have done it another way. They'd already faced scandal and risked censure for each other. That took courage, didn't it? Theirs was true love indeed.

She wondered why Dane had the papers. Shouldn't they come to her through her own lawyer? But no doubt there were copies of the papers floating around everywhere and copies of the copies--they'd been faxing things back and forth from one office to another, and who could keep track? Haste made her careless. She didn't stop to consider that her signature needed to be notarized. Details, details. She certainly didn't give a thought to

the possibility that this was a trap; that Dane intended to make one final, desperate shot at winning her back.

But he did, and he had the means to do it.

Further research conducted on the distillation produced in his initial experiments on animal tissue confirmed that he'd isolated the chemical substance responsible for the trait in *canis familiaris* for which the species is best known and loved: faithfulness. Man's best friend is so because of the presence in his blood of an enzyme that he, Dane Hoffman, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, discovered.

The enzyme, identified as Hoffman's Infusion, had been developed by a major pharmaceutical company into a drug found to have a variety of applications in animals. Under the brand name Fidex[®], the drug had just been approved by the FDA for use in humans.

Dane had rehearsed various possible scenarios, including one in which he strapped Marijayne to the examining table and injected her with the drug, using a very long needle—he may be excused, perhaps, for a little residual anger. But of course he won't do that.

Unless she refused the cup of coffee in which he planned to stir in just a teeny dose of the "medicine." He liked to think of it in that way, as "medicine," because it clarified his intentions as honorable. Marijayne was sick and he meant to cure her, that's all. He would slip her the drug—medicine—in a cup of coffee and voilà, all better! She would fall in love with him, her rightful husband, all over again. The substance would jump start her battery.

And if the effects were to wear off in a few hours? He couldn't allow himself to think of that now. It was too early to know the effects of long-

term use of Fidex. He wouldn't take chances with her health. But he would be optimistic--hadn't Marijayne taught him to look on the bright side? It would work. It must work. She'd always said he could make a contribution to medicine--and now he had. She'd only said it in the early days, when she hoped to persuade him to become a heart surgeon instead of a large animal veterinarian, but she'd been right, all the same. He had made an important discovery that would benefit humankind. And he would restore the institution of marriage to its former formidable permanence.

He'd bought a cappuccino machine expressly for the purpose. Last night he set it up in the kitchen of his parents' house to try it out. It was rather amusing because, while he's catapulted to international fame for his scientific research (he may be nominated for a Nobel prize in medicine), he could not figure out how to foam the milk for the cappuccino! It took three tries before he was able to do it properly.

Marijayne was clearly distracted when she arrived at 5:45. This meeting, long hours in the coming for Dane, was a mere incident for her. One more errand to run on her way home. First the bank, then the dry cleaner's, then the clinic to sign the divorce papers, then pick up a gallon of milk at the 7/11.

Lorraine may be well over her infatuation with her boss, but she nevertheless had no use for his soon-to-be ex-wife, whom she regarded as unworthy of Dane. Instead of inviting her to wait in Dane's office, as she formerly would do, she told her to have a seat in the waiting room, indicating a chair between a Rottweiler and a Weimaraner. The owners of these animals glanced at her with frank curiosity, seeing that she had no pet with her, as if wondering what species she belongs to.

Dane kept Marijayne waiting fifteen minutes just because he could. Meanwhile, he sent Dr. Brodsky out to the Miller farm under false pretenses. He told Lorraine to reschedule the rest of Dr. Brodsky's appointments and then she could go home early. He didn't want anyone to hear Marijayne's yelps if he had to inject her with the serum. Then he revved up his cappuccino machine and removed a sample of Fidex[®] from the cupboard.

Poor Lorraine had to deal with the Rottweiler's owner, a woman in a business suit who said she'd had to take off time from work for this appointment and that Dr. Brodsky ran his practice as unprofessionally as her gynecologist.

"Why are we doing this in the examining room?" Marijayne asked when he finally called her in.

"Well, I.... have someone waiting for me in my office," Dane said, which was one more lie he'd told her today.

"Oh, really?" Her tone suggested that she wasn't falling for it. "All right, then. Let's sign the papers!"

"Yes, let's!"

She looked at him, waiting. And all at once he realized that he had no papers! He'd been so intent on practicing with the cappuccino machine that he'd forgotten all about papers.

"How about a cup of coffee first?" he suggested, stalling for time.

Marijayne looked suspicious, which annoyed him. He opened a drawer and fumbled for a horse-sized hypodermic needle, when suddenly, she sighed and said, "Sure. Coffee would be good."

He shut the drawer on his pinky and cried out in pain. After sucking

on it a minute, he said, "Come see my new cappuccino maker."

She followed him out to the kitchen area where once he and Lorraine had sorted out frozen animal organs, and perched on a stool while he worked.

Having her full attention, he showed off his culinary skill, almost forgetting his ulterior intentions.

"I suppose you've heard about my work," he said, watching the steam pour out of the machine.

"You mean the pizza?"

He laughed. "Pizza! No, the new drug I developed." He made it sound as if developing a drug was something he did every day.

"Oh?"

"They wanted to name it after me, of course, but I said no."

"Oh?"

"There's talk of a Nobel prize..." He shrugged, as if the whole idea was preposterous.

Silence.

"That's what I heard, but it's probably only a rumor." He smiled broadly and added exactly three drops of Fidex to her cappuccino.

"Flavoring," he explained.

"You always were too modest, Dane," she says, not interested enough to ask what Fidex is.

"But I am going to take the residency."

"Residency?"

"At Mayo. In cardiology." He said this louder, to make himself heard over the noise as he foamed the milk. "I remember how you were always after me to go into 'real' medicine. And now I am. Funny how these things

work out, isn't it?"

"Cardiology?" Her voice had gotten very small, more like a squeak.

He set on the counter two mugs of cappuccino, one with Fidex, and one with chocolate raspberry. In ten minutes, his troubles would be over. She would steal into his arms--no, she'd throw herself at him like a -- like a bitch in heat.

The shock of this realization stopped him cold.

As much as he hated her for wounding him to the core of his being;

As much as he mourned, grieved, keened in the night for her loss;

She was no dog, but the woman he loved, the girl he'd married;

And she would be his by her own choice or not at all.

He took her hand and squeezed. Small-boned and delicate, it felt to him like a little bird caught in a trap. He released it.

Like a bird, she didn't recognize his generosity, just fluttered off in a panic, removing her hand.

"While I was doing my research, I read a study that said that in sixty-two different cultures divorce rates peaked after only four years of marriage. Just long enough to raise a child past infancy. Why, you may ask?"

But Marijayne didn't look even curious. In fact, she nodded as if she could understand completely.

"The chemistry changed, that's why! But you and me--baby, we were together for thirty years. We had something more than chemistry!"

He looked at her expectantly, the man of science who expected that logic would win the day.

Marijayne had done her own reading, too. In *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend* the husband simply "went away." "There's no point living with choices made by people who were different eleven years ago than they are now," he

said. Jellie had felt worse about it than he had. If Dane would just go away, maybe she could feel bad, too. But he wasn't going away.

"It was habit," she said. "That's all."

"Thirty years from now you'll be saying this to Dick."

"Thirty years from now we'll be dead and nothing will matter." She laughed and reached for one of the mugs. He pulled both mugs away from her.

"This has been good for you, Dane. You had a professional setback, but you're getting back on your feet. You're getting ahead, even: going back to school and--" She couldn't keep the annoyance out of her voice now. "Lord knows I tried to get you to become a real doctor, but you wouldn't do it for me. Now you're going to become an important heart surgeon and I won't even get to go with you when the AMA meets in some exciting city. You're just trying to spite me."

"What does the AMA convention have to do with anything?"

"Do you have any idea what it's like being the wife of a vet? People look at you like you still have your Girl Scout uniform in your closet. Like you collect bats for a hobby and nurse baby pigs in your kitchen."

She could mention Dick's seminar in Boston, how they'd stayed in a first-class hotel and were treated with respect by everyone, from the bell boy to the doorman who tipped his hat when he swung open the gleaming glass door. But she wouldn't throw that up at him.

Throughout this conversation, Lorraine's face had appeared now and again in the window in the door. Apparently she hadn't left yet. Seeing her reminded him of their afternoon of shameless sex. And he was about to administer the same drug to Marijayne in order to make her love him again? He couldn't go through with it.

She went for the cappuccino again, and he put his hand over the cup, getting it all covered with foam. Wiping his fingers with a napkin, he said, "What if I told you that I put Fidex into your coffee and that if you drink it, you will fall in love all over again--with me. Moreover, that you will remain loyal and faithful to me as long as the drug is in your system. Dick Hedstrom will be obliterated from your mind."

She laughed, but looked nervous. "You're scaring me," she said.

"When you fell in love with Dick Hedstrom, you felt that you were being swept away, that you couldn't help yourself. Didn't you? You were right, Marijayne. You were flooded with chemicals. Dopamine, norepinephrine and phenylethylamine. Amphetamines, that's all it was. And you probably thought it was the sound of his voice--."

"It was my soul connecting with his soul!"

"With any drug--even Fidex--the effects are short-lived. You build up a tolerance. It takes more and more of the substance to produce the kick. Two or three years, Marijayne, and your body simply won't be able to crank out the amount you'll need. Then you'll realize what you threw away here between us."

"Give it to me. Go ahead. I'll drink it. I'll show you. If it doesn't work, then you must let me go. Promise?"

They struggled for the mugs, sloshing the foamy liquid over the rim. Dane couldn't remember which mug had the drug. He gulped down the contents of both mugs, then bent down and licked the coffee that had spilled onto the counter.

She watched him, frightened, as if expecting Hyde to emerge from Jeckyl. But nothing seemed to happen at first. She got down from the stool and started out of the examining room.

"Wait!" he called. "It's starting to--. I feel--."

She turned to see him stagger in a circle, his eyes unfocused, his mouth open and smiling faintly. "Do you hear... little birds? Dear little birds. Love birds...."

The years rolled back as if someone had grabbed hold of the never-ending calendar in Spire Square and given it a spin like a roulette wheel. Eloise, Beatrice and Laura, Dick Hedstrom, Fidex, even Sweetie had never happened. Eternity opened up between them. The clinic evaporated around them and they were back in the coffee shop across from the College of Veterinary Medicine, sipping plain old coffee--no one had heard of cappuccino yet. For a minute he imagined that the change had happened for Marijayne as well, but gazing into her brown eyes he could see that they'd lost forever their lustrous innocence.

"You're faking," she said bitterly.

But all he could do was murmur, "F-f-f-fido!"

"I am not a dog," she says. "I am annoyed. You don't have any divorce papers for me to sign, do you?" She stormed out, slamming the door. Then, a moment later, she was back, her head peering round the half-open door. His ears perked to hear what she was about to say.

"Will you still watch the girls for me while I go on my honeymoon?"

He nodded, his eyebrows shot up, and his body whole body wagged like he couldn't quite believe his owner was leaving. He ran to the window and moaned a little as she backed the mini-van out of the parking space.

He turned around and there was Lorraine staring in disbelief.

Twenty-Three

No sun streamed through the window of the Apocalypse on this chilly overcast afternoon in December. The Rev. Ronald Damschroder blinked at the twenty-five people gathered in the pews of the Second First United Methodist Church, some of them wearing mournful faces. But this was no funeral. The organ struck up the wedding march and the small bridal party processed up the center aisle.

Eloise in pink satin as maid of honor easily drew admiring glances, and threatened to steal the attention from the bride. The Rev. Damschroder nodded encouragement--despite the brave smile, she must be devastated. That pink gown, the color of Catawba grapes--for an instant he saw Dane surrounded by his girls. The vine and the branches.

Here came the bride, a bit tired, and faded. White was not her color.

--*White?*

"Personally, I could wring both of their necks," he'd told the distraught woman who telephoned long distance earlier in the week. "I'm only going through with this wedding for the sake of the children." He tightened his grip now on his prayer book and looked away quickly, lest he betray his impatience with the bride's choice of virginal white. Dick was making his way across the nave with his best man. Hunter looks in his tuxedo like a boy not quite ready for his first prom. It used to be customary for the bride and groom to ask their siblings to serve as witnesses. Now the honors often go to the couple's eldest children. A minister these days was in danger of slipping into cynicism.

Dick looked somewhat uncomfortable himself. He kept tugging at his collar, as if trying to let in air. Could he be suffering from a bad conscience?

The Rev.Damschroder sucked in his breath. Of course! Dick Hedstrom was uncomfortable with the whole business of being inside a church. He, Ronald Damschroder, had done it at last. He had reeled in a killer shark, a Unitarian.

The groom and his bride glanced up in time to catch the Reverend's radiant smile. They thought he meant a benediction on their union. Well, perhaps he did. If the lost lamb had returned to the fold, then truly God had wrought good from what might possibly, in another time, have been construed as evil.

Now, for the sake of the children, he proceeded with the ceremony.

The honeymoon in Acapulco wasn't exactly the way they planned it. Montezuma took his revenge on Dick, and Marijayne fell asleep in a hammock and got sunstroke, not to mention a very painful sunburn. For the first week, their marriage would appear to be *ratum non consumatum*, though actually by some standards, it was not at all *ratum*, and long ago *consumatum*.

By Monday of the second week, though, they'd recovered enough to enjoy a hammock together--in the shade, and plenty of fluids, as per doctor's orders.

"Dickie," Marijayne began, sipping pineapple juice from a coconut shell, "I've been wondering when you're going to get around to giving me my wedding present."

Dick grinned, but didn't open his eyes. "I've got your present hanging, baby."

"Dickie, if it's hanging, it's not doing me a bit of good," she said, and they both chuckled.

They fell silent, each wondering whether the other one wanted to make love, but both still too weak to stir themselves into action.

Twenty-Four

The phone rang and Dane let the answering machine take the call. It was probably the drug company again, or their lawyer, wanting to quibble some more over the deal. Or his lawyer, wanting to know what to tell their lawyer. Or else it was the FDA again--with more astonishing results from their testing.

So far, Fidex[®] had been shown to:

- Curb infidelity in men in all age groups by between 56-74% and in women by between 62-83%.
- Improve ADD in adolescents, while apparently causing teenagers to develop excessively close attachments to their parents.
- Reduce the incidence of male pattern baldness.
- Prevent ingrown toenails.
- Improve myopia.

Not all the effects were strictly medical, either. Fidex[®] had brought about some unexpected behavioral phenomena as well:

- A connection had been found between the use of Fidex[®] by men in their twenties and a marked rise in applications to Catholic seminaries.
- Teenaged girls, when given only a small dosage (25 mg. bid), formed strong attachments with their mothers.
- Another unexpected finding at first not connected with Fidex[®] was a sharp improvement in job retention and an equal drop in absenteeism from work.

The FDA would require that Fidex® be marketed with the following warnings: "Fidex® should not be taken during the full moon. Men over age 64 and children under 13 should not take Fidex®. Women who may be pregnant or are nursing should not take Fidex®. Side effects may include a blackening of the nose and gums, a marked increase in hair growth (women may sprout hair on the chest and back), and itching behind the ears. These symptoms are generally mild and disappear in time."

Dane had had to get another lawyer—not exactly something he wanted to do, and a secretary. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* did cover stories, and *Playboy* wanted an interview. Showtime was planning a made-for-tv movie. He'd hoped they might get Harrison Ford to play the role of the vet, but of course Ford doesn't do made-for-tv movies, and the part went to someone by the name of Lance Duckworth.

"He's good," the casting agent told him. "Tall, very tall. Silver hair. Handsome. Oh, and—you'll like this—there's talk that Kathleen Turner is going to play the smoldering Swede."

"What smoldering Swede?"

"The woman you meet at the Nobel dinner."

The described the plot as "murder, mayhem, and orgies, orgies everywhere." "There's a smear campaign against you by the left-wing Right to Love organization, and a car chase scene in Stockholm as they try to keep you from the awards ceremony.

"The Christian delegation are singing hymns, and the Right to Lovers are all over each other, and there you are at the podium, big spotlight, white tuxedo, surrounded by all this carnage. Very Apocalyptic. You look out across the room and see this gorgeous Swede—Kathleen Turner. And then

the shots ring out--"

"No movie."

"It's all right, Dane--Kathleen Turner doesn't bump you off. It's some crazy from Ohio."

"I die? I don't even get to go home with Kathleen Turner?"

He was getting his real life and his movie life confused. Fame had happened too fast. One minute he was under suspension for something he hadn't done, and the next he was the subject of a TV movie and a contender for the Nobel Prize. Worse, he had reservations about the human applications of Fidex. He felt more trials needed to be done. He shared the same doubts as certain nay-sayers, like the writer in *Scientific American*, who wrote, "Bald Men: The New Endangered Species?"

"Evolution has always moved in the direction of more brain, less hair. The higher up the evolutionary ladder you go, the less body hair you find. Fidex® would seem to reverse that tendency. Is this progress or regress?" the article asked.

A poem published as a sidebar compared the hair on a once-bald scalp to a bloody battlefield now grass-grown: yet one more denial of human corruption and corruptibility.

A cartoon showed Bigfoot sitting contentedly by the fire of a middle-class home beside a dumpy wife. "This is your marriage. This is your marriage on Fidex. Of course they're faithful--who else would have 'em?"

The tabloids were saying he'd developed "the serum" after learning that his wife was having an affair with his attorney. They ran a doctored photo showing him completely covered with hair, teeth bared, and on top of his head a pair of horns. He supposed they were cuckold's horns.

Not only had he created a monster, the photo showed him as the monster he'd created.

His therapist counseled him to embrace the labels, but to redefine the terms like a good postmodernist. "You created a monster. Fine. But what does that mean? If you redefine 'monster,' you can create an 'unmonster.'"

Dane regarded him with a dubious look. "You should have been a lawyer," he said.

He went home and tried it—for about two minutes.

"I am a *monster*! I am a monster! I *am* a monster!"

He couldn't get the digitized photo from the tabloid out of his head. Looking in the mirror, he saw horns.

The man who always credited Marijayne with what he made of himself refused now, the one time she clearly deserved it, to blame her for his disgrace.

Twenty-Five

Dick and Marijayne, their luggage loaded into the trunk of the dark red Lexus at the airport drove West on the highway that ran parallel to the old Yellow Dog Trail towards Vieux Chien, to begin their married life together.

Marijayne said, "I can never drive along this stretch of the highway without thinking of all the people who traveled this way before me. The Indians, the French, the pioneers, bumping along the dirt road in their wagons. I can almost hear their pots and pans rattling!"

"That's the trash bag in the trunk filled with aluminum cans that we forgot to recycle before the wedding," Dick laughed.

"Oh, Dick, don't spoil it for me. So much history--and yet, so many new beginnings, too. And now--us!" Marijayne hummed softly. Neither gave another thought to the cans or to the other refuse of their lives that may be waiting for them at home. And though Dick knew this route used to be used to carry the dead to the burial grounds, he didn't correct her. Let her think only of new beginnings. "We're getting close!" She breathed the first fumes, like sweet sulfur, from the bubble gum factory. "Look at the sun! All gold and gritty-looking--like a creme brulée!"

Dick chuckled. "This little woman always did like dessert," he said and, lifting the little hand he's been squeezing, he kissed it.

"I just think Vieux Chien is the best place in the whole world!" his bride cried.

Dick couldn't agree more, though the route into town from the airport

took them past several factories, a couple of them that have been boarded up since the seventies, and an auto junk yard. Not even the soft drifts of clean, fresh snow could completely salvage a landscape dotted with port-a-potties and rusty orange drums and giant spools of cable.

Not far from the veterinary clinic, Dick pulled into a parking lot that outside a little shop called The Sugar and Spice. The pink neon sign advertised

Gifts•Mackinac Island Fudge•Ice Cream.

"Didn't this used to be a Denny's?" Marijayne asked.

"Yes. And before that, a Howard Johnson's."

"More town history! So, what are we doing here?"

"I'm giving you your wedding present."

"You mean inside this shop? But it's closed. I don't see any lights on."

Finally he reached into the glove compartment and brings out a key.

"Baby," he said. "It's all your's." He swept the air with his arm, indicating the Sugar and Spice.

"I--I don't understand...."

"The shop--it's your's. I bought it for you!"

"Oh, Dick!" Her face twitched. I--I don't know what to say."

Now Dick began to telephone Sharon with excuses. "I know I owe you money, and I'll pay you as soon as I can. But things are tight for me just now," he'd say, or suggest that they "go 50/50" for some child-related expense or other.

Dick's unhappiness, even his contempt, she could deal with. But not his whining and begging. Not when he owned two houses and a Lexus, and had just honeymooned in Mexico. What a phony! For all that Marijayne

tricked him out in button-down shirts and khaki slacks, he was no more the yuppy prince than Adam was a Schnauzer after getting his spring cut.

But Sharon couldn't afford to be genuine, either, not in her dealings with either Milord or Lady. Whether she cackled or scolded, she'd only be playing the role of psycho bitch they'd cast her in. She would never go so far as to adopt Marijayne's melodic "Hel-l-o-oh!"--truly, no one else could make so many syllables from that little word. But she found herself modulating her tone just the same when she spoke with Dick, screening out all traces of recrimination and bitterness. Every conversation between them now was scrupulously polite and necessarily brief, as she could never maintain that pitch for long. Oh the irony, that even now that she should feel free, in some ways she felt more controlled by him than ever.

When he phoned for understanding, for more time, she knew he was really asking for a write-off.

"I wish I could just tell you to forget it, but I'm afraid I can't!" she sympathized.

"I understand! Things are a bit tight for me now, too. But...." she sighed.

"I expect to be paid what you owe me, but if you can't pay it all at once, I guess I can wait," she said with exquisite grace.

Then she would set down the receiver and go clean out cupboards.

Like Midas's wife, who told her secrets to the rushes, Sharon bared her soul to her cupboards. She soon had the best organized cupboards of anyone in three counties. But if those cupboards could talk, the tales they would tell....

Entering the back door of the gracious, three-story, seven-bedroom

home (you could fit the old house on Grand Boulevard in the front half of this one) one evening about a week after they returned from the honeymoon, Dick was almost overcome by an intense fruity/flowery smell that exceeded anything the bubble gum factory had spewed out in its history. He recognized the smell, of course, from the Sugar and Spice. But so strong, he'd think Marijayne had brought the entire stock of fragrance products home with her.

He followed the smell out to the dining room. Boxes of aromatherapy candles (votives, pillars in various stair-step sizes like children, and three-wick logs), cellophane packages of potpourri, and tiny bottles of essential oils were lined up along the dining room buffet, and Marijayne, clearly in her element, was removing candles from their wrapping and setting them in an assortment of candle holders: gleaming brass, cut glass, wrought iron, ceramic; pillars, cups, and tiles; some of them tied with raffia bows, others wreathed with plastic flowers. She picked up a thick, butternut pillar candle and its wide glass hurricane shade and smiled at Dick as she carried it from the room, humming, towards the living room.

"I couldn't resist, Dick!" she explained, bursting back into the dining room to take up her next arrangement, a sort of shrine complete with bubbling fountain and miniature Buddha figure with a single votive candle. "This is for the meditation room."

"Meditation room?" He followed her through the swinging door, down the hallway and into the sun room, with the familiar set of bamboo furniture from the house on Grand Boulevard. She sets the fountain on the table between two armchairs and plugs it in. "Nice, huh?"

"Very nice, dear," he murmured.

"I just want to make this home perfect for us," she said, clasping her

hands together with such fervor he could sob. She was so pleased with the results of her decorating that he could't bring himself to rebuke her in any way. And why should he? She only meant to please him.

The next day, he came home to find little books everywhere: on the piano, under the coffee table, even on the back of the toilet tank. Dear little books, pretty little books, with narrow satin ribbon place markers. Some of them he recognized as ones she sent him through the mail--to the office, much to his embarrassment a couple of times when Margaret opened them. Other titles were new and the pages opened with difficulty as if they'd never been turned before. *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul*, *The Art of Marriage*, *One Heart, One Love*, etc. etc. The looks mattered as much as the words themselves, maybe more.

He looked at her, questioning.

She nodded. Yes, from the shop.

That night his head hit something hard on his down pillow. He reached inside the pillow slip and finds *365 Ways to Show Her You Love Her*. He was not surprised that the first way is to "Surprise her with little gifts."

Over the next few weeks, she added more decorative touches from the Sugar and Spice. She seemed to be adding things in alphabetical order. C for candles, D he really had to look for: drapery hardware. It was as if she were going down her inventory list. By the time she hit E (enamel ware), he figured out her *modus operandi* and was afraid to come home the next night, for fear that F would be big-ticket furniture. To his relief, it was only frogs.

He could hardly concentrate at the office any more. He kept a running list, trying to anticipate Marijayne's next choice.

"Elaine," he might say, "what household items can you think of that begin with the letter K?"

"I don't know. Kitchen something, I suppose. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. Do you mean ... kitchen towels?"

"Maybe. What is this?"

"I'm just trying to think of something a woman might like to have if she were, you know, decorating a new house."

"Oh, in that case, a whole new kitchen! Custom-built cabinetry, wood floors, granite countertops. Hand-painted tiles. New appliances--stainless steel finish. I saw the most amazing ones at the Home Expo last spring. Modular cooking units that you customize according to your cooking preferences--you know, a grill, a convection oven, a commercial sized range.... You can have these modular units all over the kitchen. Of course, it's expensive.... Dick, do you feel all right? You look pale."

It's not like she brought stuff home every day. But not a week went by that she didn't add some things.

"After all, you already bought it for me, so it's not costing me anything. Besides, I want to show my appreciation," she said one night when he points to the display of hat boxes stacked on her dresser. "Yes, but--" he begins, but when he turns around to go back downstairs, he saw a wide-brimmed straw hat hanging from a hook on the bedroom door.

He attempted a joke. "Now we need a sign to hang over it: 'Scarlet O'Hara slept here.'" He instantly regretted giving her the idea.

Then downstairs, he spotted a new hall mirror and, when he stepped outside to pick up the newspaper, on the front door is a large brass H for Hedstrom.

"Darling, I thought you might want to sell some of the merchandise. You know--make a little money? That way you could buy more--" He waved his hand towards the mirror. "--stuff!"

"I see." Her voice was very quiet and he could see he'd hurt her feelings. Making up took all evening and involved a special dinner out and sitting through "Touched by an Angel," with occasional switches to the Home Shopping Network.

She was deeply hurt that he saw her as a mere shopkeeper, one of those edgy, desperate women entrepreneurs whose dreams she'd watched go down the tubes so many times when she worked at the paper. She's sold them advertising, seen the brave front crumble, heard the tone of the advertising go sour, from the bravado of the first inventory reduction sale to the bitterness of the going out of business sale. She had not married an attorney in order to run a business.

It evolved naturally, over time, after she began inviting friends in for luncheon and bridge. Someone would admire the wreath in the front hall, and Marijayne would tell them, "I can let you have it--" Then, before the friend misunderstood or got too excited, "-- wholesale."

Well, she couldn't very well *give* it away.

But she was remarkably detached from her things, perhaps because, as the saying goes, "there's plenty more where that came from." Marijayne's luncheons became quite popular and soon, friends were bringing friends. She added a Victorian high tea service on Thursday afternoons. Dressed in period costume, she greeted her company in the former meditation room, now the "parlour." The wicker furniture that went so well with jade Buddhas and Oriental philosophy was equally compatible with tea and scones.

Dick's children were visiting for the summer, so she offered Hannah Victorian-era wages to play parlour maid. In full uniform of black dress and white apron and cap, Hannah practiced her curtsy in front of the hall mirror, until Eloise, Beatrice, and Laura, swept down the grand staircase in hoop

skirts and ruffles.

"We're the string quartet," Eloise explained, "minus the second violin."

The string quartet played while the guests arrived and Hannah, bobbing up and down, served refreshments from a large tray filled with china pots of Earl Grey or Ceylon tea imported from Harrod's in London, plates of currant scones from the corner bakery, and raspberry jam and canned lemon pie filling from the shelves at Sonny's that Marijayne spooned into a blue-and-white transferware bowls and offered as "lemon curd."

If Dolly was around, she sometimes could be persuaded to play gypsy fortune teller, got up in a costume of her own devising that was intended to portray the shabby circumstances of the lower classes living in Victorian England--Dolly *had* to make a political statement and, of course, she threw in some vocabulary that raised her step-mother's eyebrows. Dolly was a hit with the guests, however, with her readings of the tea leaves in their china cups.

Afterward, saying something charming like, "I must absent myself from your company for a while," Marijayne would rustle in her long skirts down the hall and into the kitchen.

The first time she did this, her guests looked around at all the pretty things in the room. And when ten more minutes had passed and still Marijayne hadn't returned, they got up from their wicker chairs to get a better look at a frame or a lamp on the other side of the room. Someone saw that many items had price tags, and when Marijayne finally came back with a cigar box that rattled with loose change and a receipt pad, the refined tenor of the afternoon dissipated as quickly as when you finally peel off your control-top pantyhose after a hot day at work and let it all hang out. The women grabbed this candlestick, that vase. They elbowed their way to the sterling

silver salt and pepper shakers. Money was exchanged, credit cards flashed. Everyone went home feeling a little richer, for all that they'd spent money, convinced that their purchase would imbue their own homes with a little of the magic of the afternoon Marijayne had created for them.

She had a gift—one that didn't come from the Sugar and Spice or carry a price tag, though it certainly seemed to attract money. Male or female, people sooner or later opened their wallet in her presence.

The Thursday afternoon tea service was always evolving in interesting ways. Take the readings, for example. Marijayne acquired a selection of periodicals from an antiques dealer and hit upon the idea of reading a short passage as part of the afternoon.

She stood by the grandfather clock—the one in the dining room—stiffly, the way she imagined a Victorian lady wearing a corset would stand, holding her book or periodical. Then she began, with a nugget of wisdom drawn off the top of her head.

"It is the mother who sets the emotional tone in the home," she reminded the women in soothing tones to model how this end was accomplished. Indeed, as she droned on, pairs of eyes fluttered shut. "Here is a passage that illustrates my point. Today's reading is from a book which, you'll be happy to hear, is available at the Sugar and Spice, entitled *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, by my dear friend Sarah Stickney Ellis."

There were a few titters at this, but the cynics were easily silenced.

"How often has man returned to his home with a mind confused by the many voices, which in the mart, the exchange, or the public assembly, have addressed themselves to his inborn selfishness, or his worldly pride; and while his integrity was shaken, and his resolution

gave way beneath the pressure of apparent necessity, or the insidious pretenses of expediency, he has stood corrected before the clear eye of woman, as it looked directly to the naked truth, and detected the lurking evil of the specious act he was about to commit.”

Here she paused and looked around at her listeners so they could remark her own clear eye.

“Nay, so potent may have become this secret influence, that he may have borne it about with him like a kind of second conscience, for mental reference, and spiritual counsel, in moments of trial; and when the snares of the world were around him, and temptations from within and without have bribed over the witness in his own bosom, he has thought of the humble monitress who sat alone, guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home; and the remembrance of her character, clothed in moral beauty, has scattered the clouds before his mental vision, and sent him back to that beloved home, a wiser and a better man.” (1721-1722)

Hannah and Beatrice burst out laughing, and Eloise shooed them from the room, then stood next to the French doors like an avenging angel, to make sure they didn't try to come back in. From here she could see everything: the tasteful elegance of the room, her mother's poise and grace, and especially the hypnotic effect she had on her listeners. Eloise had been deeply hurt by the divorce and was most anxious to learn from it. Her children would not suffer as she had--she hoped. The women who came for tea and refreshment clearly thought that her mother had some wisdom to offer. And these women scarcely realized as Eloise did the extent of Marijayne's achievement. Like a proper Victorian lady skilled in needlework, Marijayne had worked together the raw edges of their old life and their new

into a seamless whole. Snip, snip, as with small embroidery scissors, she skillfully removed Dane from her canvas and with tiny stitches applied Dick in his place. No small achievement, that! She was learning a great deal about how to get along in the world, particularly in dealing with men.

And so Marijayne Hedstrom came to be regarded as a modern-day angel of the house, the upholder of tradition and of family. The home she had created stood for refinement, domestic harmony, and middle class respectability. The vintage house, the antique furnishings, the model of domestic life the Hoffman-Hedstroms adopted all contributed to the illusion that they'd been married forever. Old money, old family, etc. etc. With Sharon gone, only Dane served to remind anyone outside the family of the truth. But in fact, Sharon continued to haunt the residents of the manse, telephoning Dick with requests for more child support. She claimed to be having trouble finding work, but Marijayne figured she was milking Dick, playing on his sympathy. She reassured him with her usual optimism that things would work out for Sharon once she broke the cycle of blame and negativity. "She's got to surround herself with positive energy. Once she does that, all kinds of opportunities will open up for her. It's all up to her," she said.

No one was more convinced of her role than Marijayne herself. More and more, she forgot to slip out of character after her tea guests departed. Sometimes she brought her little bell to the dinner table and rang for the maid. There *was* a cleaning lady who came once a week, but no maid. Dick would scowl at Hannah until she jumped up and offered to fetch the mashed turnips or raspberry shrub prepared from "receipts" Marijayne found in a very old cook book.

If Wolfe politely turned down the mashed turnips, Marijayne dabbed at her eyes with an Irish linen handkerchief she kept tucked in her sleeve and Dick, scowling again, asked, "Do you want to make Marijayne cry?"

He ate whatever was served, and if Dolly reminded him of his cholesterol, he scowled at her, too.

Dick was developing a whole vocabulary of scowls, much like Dane's language of winks. As Marijayne slipped further into her role as Victorian matron, he became more and more stern Victorian paterfamilias. At night he was haunted by strange dreams in which he was chased by a team of three horses. Mares, they were; the color of the Sugar Plum Fairy, of catawba wine. Then suddenly they weren't chasing him, but driving him, cracking the whip, and his harness bells jangled crazily as round and round he went, tripping as he lifted his hooves over the hoops and hurdles in his path. He was all thumbs coordinating four feet.

Twenty-Six

On the other side of the world in Wisconsin, Sharon was, like Dane, reinventing herself, too. She toured with the Blankenships for about six months, but it wasn't working out for anyone. Dr. Blankenship began to suspect that Mr. Dr. B's affection for Sharon was more than maternal. One night she accused him of being a *slyz boll*. Sharon had thought her beloved mentor above such pettiness, but she knew there was just the tiniest bit of truth to the charge.

She had not responded. Having been betrayed by one friend herself, she was not about to betray another. She wasn't interested in him in that way, anyway. But what if she had been? Would she have done the right thing? She hoped so.

She left the Blankenships while they were doing a stint at the University of Big Island and found that she didn't want to leave the island. She got work freelancing for the *Big Island Times*. Occasionally she got a juicy assignment, but mostly she wrote fillers: articles about the importance of regular oil changes, why you should wax your car--stuff like that. The pay was low and of course she had no benefits, and the hours were erratic and unpredictable. But she was too busy to be lonely. She had the kids, she had a cat, she had cable TV. She went out with the sports editor once. He took her out for a meal he probably couldn't afford--then talked her ear off for two solid hours. It was all about him. What a genius he was. etc. etc. She'd forgotten how egocentric men of her generation could be. She'd been spoiled by Mr. Dr. B. Another relationship was nipped in the bud when she

learned that the guy's first wife had been murdered. They'd never found the killer, he said. She appreciated his candor. She was lonely, but not that lonely. She had the kids, she had a cat, she had cable TV. She had hobbies. Every month, when she wrote out her bills, she drew up a new budget, making up a whole set of hypothetical situations and then figuring out whether she could still meet her expenses. What if there was a sudden increase of, say, twenty percent, in their monthly heating bill? Or what if the city reservoir goes dry and their water bill goes up...seventy percent or more? What if the car died-- or--what if Dick died and the child support stopped?

Her cats slept on her bed: one on her feet, one in the crook of her arm. She placed a pillow behind her. Half asleep, the pillow pressing into her back felt like a warm body.

She watched cable TV. Her favorite show was "Miracle Pets."

Sharon Hedstrom, freelance journalist for the *Big Island Times*, turned off her radio and pulled her 1993 Ford Aerostar into the valet parking lot at the Island Pines Hotel, driving over the curb much to the dismay of the worn-out shocks. This was two months after Wolfe had gone back to Michigan to live with Dick and Marijayne because Sharon was at her wits' end trying to deal with his problems at school. One more loss, but she'd anticipated that sooner or later it would happen: the chief's son would need to return to his father's lodge to learn how to be a man. Bringing the car to a bouncing halt, she slid her press card into the lower right of the windshield. The attendant smirked as he pulled open the driver's door for her. The vinyl upholstery was cracked, the front passenger's seat was broken. Spiral notebooks, folders, loose papers were scattered all over the backseat. Sharon

was used to the disdain of workers like this young man. He probably drove a deathtrap himself, a klunker held together by bungee cords and duct tape, but because he got to park Mercedes and Maseratis all day, he had an inflated sense of himself.

She strolled into the hotel lobby with its paddle fans and shabby chic-goes-Polynesian decor and the floor seemed to quake for just a second; the effect was jarring. An enormous black-lacquered cage held four brilliantly-colored macaws and parrots and a pair of love birds. One of the parrots whistled as she walked by. "Hey, honey! How about a kiss?" the bird squawked loudly, the only male attention she'd gotten in some time. At the desk she asked for Dane Hoffman. "Please tell him I'll be in the lounge." She was nervous about seeing him again. Not because he was Dane, but because of the associations.

She wandered out to the terrace and sat at a table for two. She ordered a drink. The decor was tropical, and on a humid day like this, she could easily think she were in the tropics. She'd been here before, with Dick, the summer before his campaign. Even if they hadn't been, she'd probably be thinking of him now. There were always associations. Even seven years after he'd left. When would they ever stop? What she remembered now was how, wherever they traveled, whether they were renting a summer cottage or a suite in a chic hotel, the minute they closed the door, they were in each other's arms. It got to be that they knew what the other was thinking in the elevator up to the room, in the cab on the way to the hotel, at the luggage claim carousel in the airport. They were eager to be alone together. Marijayne couldn't take that away from her or do a thing to change it. Nothing but Alzheimer's could rob her of the memory, and even illness couldn't change history.

"Sharon Hedstrom? Is it you?"

The utter surprise in his voice annoyed her. He never made the connection. "Hello, Dane. It's been a long time. And look at you girls! Almost grown-up and so beautiful. What would you like to drink? I'm having mineral water."

Eloise and Beatrice looked nothing less than thunderstruck to see Sharon.

"We thought you were off digging somewhere," Eloise said. She made it sound somehow as if Sharon were digging for worms.

"Ah, no. I did field work one summer, but I'm working for the paper now.

They had pictured her in sturdy boots and pants and wearing a safari hat, her hair pulled back, unbrushed, into a ponytail, and no make-up, only a thick slathering of sun screen on her nose. Perhaps their mother had painted this description for them. Sharon, stripped of wifehood and motherhood and every vestige of womanhood to boot, scrambling for meaning, devoting herself to Work.

And here she was looking quite comfortable in her female skin, which under the right conditions tanned to a quite lovely shade of gold. Her hair, too--she must color it. She ought to be good and gray by now. She's too old to be wearing it long and loose like this. She looked almost pretty, except for the wrinkles. She'd lost weight! She was ridiculous, Eloise decided. No matter what she did, she would always be a woman scorned.

"We're meeting someone here, but let's have dinner," Dane said.

"I think you're looking for me, actually."

"You! Of course! I'm so sorry--I never made the connection. I guess I just couldn't picture you in this kind of setting."

Eloise lay a hand on Dane's arm and said, "We're going to the beach, Dad. See you later." She started off, then looked back to wait for Beatrice, who called, "I'll be along in a minute."

Sharon took out her notebook and pen as if to set her own parameters for their meeting: purely business. Would she be interested in him if he hadn't been the husband of that woman? But he had, and was tainted by the association, though very handsome. She saw women giving him the once-over as they passed their table.

"I heard on the way over that they've withdrawn Fidex from the market. I'm sorry, Dane. That must be a blow."

"Not at all—I fought to have it withdrawn. The potential for good with Fidex is great, but also the potential for evil. Once it's all sorted out, then, of course the drug can be safely prescribed—not 'marketed,' mind you. Prescribed."

Sharon begins scribbling notes. "Not marketed, prescribed."

"I object to appealing to patients as consumers. It should be the doctor who determines the appropriateness of a medication, on the basis of empirical information and not on marketing hype."

He said he'd turned down the residency at the Mayo Clinic. "My heart's not in cardiology, if you'll pardon the pun." He winked.

Sharon smiled, but didn't look up from her notes.

"I'm very interested in animal behavior now and the way it relates to humans. I know that sounds a lot like simply anthromorphizing, but I think it's much more than that. You see, one night I was looking at my dog—I mean really looking him in the eye—and after awhile, I began to feel that I understood what he was thinking. To such a strong degree that I felt I could not only read his thoughts but was thinking his thoughts with him. I was

identifying with him in such a way that I was actually one with him. I was my dog!" Dane apparently found this experience to have been quite meaningful. Sharon duly scribbled away.

Beatrice leaned in towards him and said, "Dad, you really ought to go back to being a vet. I just wish you would."

Dane shakes his head sadly and stroked Beatrice's blonde head. "There's no going back for any of us, my pet. No way of pretending that certain things never happened. The future still looks bright. 'Some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods'-- or perhaps dogs." He'd been reading poetry lately. Reading *Frankenstein* had opened a whole new world of the imagination to the man of science.

He fell silent, then: "Well, Sharon, we have something in common! Something other than... you know. I'm dabbling in journalism, too. I write a column for the *Evening Howl*."

"Really."

"It's called 'Focus on Fido,'" Beatrice said. "It's a little bit of everything: medical advice, tips on training your pet, stories about animals."

"I write it to the animals. Not the owners. I picture my readers and somehow they always have four legs, not two. And I find that I'm not as limited as when I'm trying to communicate with people." He touched his heart, then drew his hand away to demonstrate the heart-to-heart connection he felt with animals.

"He has an office at the newspaper," Beatrice explained.

"It's only a cubicle," Dane said. "Marijayne put in a word for me with Dirk Power and--."

Beatrice interrupted. "It wasn't Mom, it was Vera Krause. And she did it to get back at Mom. She doesn't like her." She gave Sharon a look.

"His office is right next to Mom's," she said, and Sharon understood that she was meant to imagine poor Marijayne's discomfort to be working right next to her ex-husband.

"That's not true," Dane said, "It wasn't Vera who got me the job, it was Marijayne. I owe it all to her."

"You owe it to yourself, most likely," Sharon said, getting tired of his denial of everything. What was it about that woman--what chemical or enzyme made everyone think the best of her? Now, if Dane could isolate *that* mysterious compound, he'd really have something.

They met for dinner, alone. Sharon had suggested the girls hook up with Hannah--they were, after all step-sisters, but Eloise and Beatrice were tired after their trip and would probably just order room service, they said.

"I confess that when I first heard about Fidex, I almost contacted you to see if you'd give me some to slip in Dick's food," Sharon said, and sipped her pina colada. Dane had insisted they order the drinks to "get into the island spirit."

It was his turn to reveal something of his private pain. He could tell her what it felt like to look out from his parents' living room window and catch a glimpse of Marijayne and Dick on their front porch. But instead he launched into a spiel about the band boosters. Maybe he was right. If they had to talk about it, it meant they weren't free.

She sipped her drink through the straw, suddenly grinning as she recalled the libation the Blankenships had served the night of the spring festival.

Suddenly a great whoop was heard and a half-naked young Asian man was seen running along the path carrying a burning torch, with which

he began lighting a series of torches stuck in the sand. It was a nightly ritual, done of course for the tourists. Sharon was suddenly hungry for a Hot Fudge Brownie Delight. Then, incredibly, she felt a stab of homesickness for Vieux Chien and missed Wolfe so badly her lungs hurt.

As if he could read her thoughts, Dane asked, "When are you coming back?"

"Coming back? You mean, to live? I couldn't do that. I came back for a visit once and I could hardly breathe. Vieux Chien will have to come to me."

"I'm here." He laughed—and winked. Then, as if afraid she might get the wrong idea, he pulled out his wallet and said, "Want to buy a car wash ticket for the PTA?"

She wished dinner to come so he'd shut up.

After dinner, they went to the lounge to watch the floor show of Polynesian dance, performed by students from the university: blonde and blue-eyed, some of them, but they put on a good show, and Dane reveled in it like a man coming alive years too late. Sharon knew how he felt. She thought of the Blankenships again.

When they said good night, Dane said, "You know Ewan MacGregor, teaches English at the high school? A while back we were having a beer after band practice, and he said something about Dick. What was it? That Dick Hedstrom had given up the life he had for—the life he had. Wait. No. 'Some people,' he said, 'may think that by moving across the street, he'd turned his whole life around.' But in *his* opinion—Ewan's— 'he'd only given up the life he had for the life he had.'"

Sharon laughed. They leaned in to kiss each other good night, then changed their minds at the same time, and shook hands instead. They each

felt a certain pity for the other, truth be told; and then there were the associations.

"If you see Chuck Upton, tell him hello for me," Sharon said.

Twenty-Seven

On the other side of the world, in Wisconsin, Sharon Hedstrom was watching the sun come up out of Lake Michigan. Years of early rising to breast feed or diaper an infant had taught her to appreciate mornings as the best part of the day. She kept a blanket in the back of the car and often rose at dawn on a weekend morning and drove to the beach to watch the sunrise. Hannah rarely came with her. Now a sleep-deprived teenager, she preferred to sleep in when she could.

Alone, Sharon sipped bottled water and saw someone farther down the beach pull a small boat onto the sand and begin doing the salute to the sun.

The sun coming up out of the water looked like the host held over the rim of the chalice by God's own hands. She wondered if she should have made Hannah go to church after they moved here. Great-Grandma Wolfe must be turning in her grave in the cemetery where the number of family graves never added up, rolled round with rocks and stones and trees. Sharon still felt the ancestral pull. The horizon was empty, but for the figure on the beach, whom she could see now was a man, stripped to the waist, performing his rites like some tribal priest.

Just over the horizon was Michigan, a mittened hand poised as if to blot out the sun as it came up in the East, and she would always feel its presence. And Vieux Chien, a mere hair on the hand, a mole, an age spot. She pictured the pale sun lighting up the Never-Ending Calendar in Spire Square, calling the citizens to the monthly parade. She imagined the

worshippers shut up in their houses of prayer this Sunday morning. And of course she thought of her home, where Randi Fitz said the new owners had gotten rid of the apple tree where Hannah and Beatrice Hoffman used to play house. Across the street, Marijayne was probably making blueberry waffles for Dick and Wolfe, the Sunday morning stand-by. It was funny, really. She'd always thought Marijayne felt herself to be a little better than Sharon, but it seemed that she'd only envied her. She had become Sharon. She was welcome to Dick, but would never forgive her for Wolfe--though that was her own fault. And now she knew that she had to find a way back, a way back to Wolfe. She leaned back on her elbows to take in the wide embrace of sky, from the thin band of brilliant orange at the horizon to the deep purplish blue still dotted with stars and a sliver of moon, bending her head back farther so that her mouth fell open like the matamata turtle. She felt herself let go. It felt like prayer.

When she looked again, the figure on the beach was coming towards her. At first she thought it was the young Asian man who'd performed the ritual torch-lighting at the Island Palms Hotel. But as he approached, she was that he wasn't Asian, or young. He was grinning broadly, unashamed of the way his pale belly jiggled as he strode toward her in the sand. Chuck Upton held out his arms and, as he'd done so often before, said, "Sharon, you're coming with me."

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