THESE ARE THE BINDS THAT TIE

Laura Gray, award winner

ON THE MORNING of Nanette Netherton's eighty-ninth birthday she woke with a hollow, nervous feeling that something bad had happened the day before. She woke exhausted and sad, as if she'd cried all night. The more she tried to remember yesterday, the angrier she got with herself for having such a slow brain and finally resolved it was better to let the incident surface than become upset. Nanette did not wait for her daughter-in-law, Rose, to come dress her tiny, thinned body or push her petite hands through sleeves, or tie her shoes. When a young woman, Nanette had been so delicately fashionable in neat suits, long gloves, rakish hats with plumes! There were sepia photographs to testify. Her fingers now had shrunk and her knuckles swelled; the ring on her third finger dangled large but would never fall off its worn groove. Her blue-veined skin was parchment paper, speckled brown in places as hand-made maps are burned with a match to look ancient. Against the light, she was nearly transparent. The droopy-cornered eyes, the blue-filmed brown eyes closed often. Still she sat straight, stood straight, held up her white-haired head under an invisible book. She looked like a proper, willful, but terribly wizened child. With slow precision Nanette put on a blouse that buttoned down the front, her dark blue skirt with the two large front pockets, a red cardigan sweater. She slid her puffed feet and ankles into stockings and slippers. Today was her birthday, let her have what she would. What she wanted: a walk outside if the weather was nice, and a coconut cake. To look a little dressy for the occasion she put on a pair of clip earrings. A pair. A pair. But that was it! A shiny, golden pear, balanced on a pyramid of others in a basket on the dining room table, surfaced in her mind. Yesterday Nanette had nibbled that pear and been shocked—it tasted like poison! Nanette Netherton remembered clearly she had nearly been poisoned to death.

Hand tracing the bannister, she descended indignant. To the dining room. To the pear, still in its spot, teethmarks carefully turned downward. Yesterday, hadn't Rose left it here intentionally! Hadn't she not fed Nanette lunch knowing she would eat the pear! Nanette felt in her skirt pocket for the sticky piece she'd bitten off but wisely not swallowed. Luckily not swallowed.

Nanette pocketed the pear for evidence; she would have to, somehow, alert the police.

There she was, omnipresent Rose, arms folded, head tilted back, biting the corner of her lip. Her greying hair pulled back slick into a tiny ponytail accentuated the harsh bones of her wide face—which was flushed from stove heat. It was also barely wrinkled as it should've been at her age. No wrinkles around her colorless mouth or hooded, deep blue eyes arched over with perfect semi-circle black brows. But then, Rose had never smiled much in the past ten years.

Rose let out a sigh and with a reddened hand led Nanette to a chair by the kitchen window. "Will you just sit here while I cook," she said. "Just sit quietly for one moment so I can get breakfast done. You should've waited for me—I don't want you falling down any stairs."

I'm watching you, thought Nanette. I know what you're up to—just let me form a plan.

Rose popped the toast out of the toaster with a twang.

Three places were set: three placemats with Audubon drawings of birds, three linen napkins folded lengthwise and threaded through wood napkin rings, three glasses of orange juice, two cups for coffee. The kitchen glowed faintly yellow from oblique-entering sunrays. Sitting there quietly for one moment Nanette looked out the window.

Springtime had come at last. It had come entirely that morning, pushing out stale, dead Winter. No more frosted, coleslaw grass. No frozen mud. Even all the autumn leaves never raked from under bushes had mysteriously disappeared. Spring had come perfectly groomed, yellow-green, pale blue, with crocuses, and a particular forsythia bush branch that tapped against the window pane. Nanette put her fingers against the glass to touch the star-shaped, yellow flowers bloomed just that morning for her.

"I remember," she began a story, the kind that came with a clear burst of childhood, "I remember being terribly sick on a beautiful day when I was four." Her voice was low-pitched, her elocution precise. "Mother made me lie on the couch downstairs so she could keep an eye on me and also do the ironing. She was a very good housekeeper, you know. I could hear every sound that day. When she opened the back door I heard sheets flapping on the line. I heard the click of the irons on the stove as she changed the handle from a cold one to a hot one. I heard the drip drop drop of the faucet. Most of all I heard Arthur Pearsall playing outside. He used to run a stick across his fence next door—back and forth. 'Arthur, get in,' his mother would call. 'Arthur get in,' just like that. As loud as you please from a window, as if there were no doors she could walk outside of. Arthur's rattle that day was a rattle in my head and my tears of frustration just made me feel more miserable. Oh I was so hot! Burning up with a fever, you know. At last I couldn't stand being on the couch another minute. I got up very fast—Mother had gone out back again—and ran out the door. Immediately the whole world spun

around. Tatatatat went Arthur with his stick. I ran through this spinning world, knocking Arthur down flat. And I fainted right on top of him. Because he thought I had done it on purpose he hated me forever after that."

Rose straightened her sweater down over her pants. She opened and closed the refrigerator door.

Those forsythia branches were delicately shaded brown-green and dotted with rough spots; Nanette wanted to put her hand through the glass and touch the one that knocked against the window, so close. What a beautiful day to be outside.

Rose said, "Tippity-tap, tippity-tap. Aren't you ever still?"

Nanette pulled her hand away from the window, placed it in her lap.

"Breakfast is almost ready. For heaven's sake, wait."

"Open the window," she said.

"I thought you liked them closed. Besides, it's too cold."

"Think I'll catch my death?"

"That's what you always say," said Rose.

The two women looked at each other in silence. Rose was sullen and school-teacherish. Sour. Dour. What a shame she was so cold a fish. Those emotionless Scandinavians. Nanette knew it was warm enough for a walk. Later she would escape.

"Ray, please come in here and take care of Nanette. She's getting antsy," called Rose to her husband, who was somewhere between the upstairs and down; they could hear his footsteps.

There was a time when Rose had called Nanette "Mother." Tall, large-boned Rose with the wide cheekbones; a young, strong, and pretty wife Rose, had dusted and vacuumed, plumped pillows, cleaned windows, made anise cookies. Done everything but wash and comb and stiffly dress the children—which she had never borne—all for the visit of Nanette and Cecil. Calling Nanette Mother, she had asked for recipes, asked how does one get a chocolate stain out of a tablecloth? But it turned out Rose did not like housework and, as she'd never had children, she decided to teach them. She taught and loved them. Then after thirty years she taught and hated them. Then Cecil had died. Then at his funeral Nanette had collapsed, bringing her into Rose's home.

For two weeks Nanette was put to bed at Rose and Raymond's house. She lost ten pounds off the 100 that she weighed. Although by normal reckoning she was then seventy-nine years old, she knew she had been only forty for those past twenty-nine years. What a shock that, in two weeks, her ankles swelled, her fingers got arthritic, her blood pressure soared. She became shrunken, faded, lined, bent, and cracked. Old age fell on her with the surprise quickness of a winter night. The thoroughness of its dark cold made her cry out in dreams in which she woke in an unfamiliar room and, turning to touch Cecil, did not find him beside her. Then she would truly wake, sitting up, her dream come true. She would wake cut loose, suspended, in

a darkness like the vastness of outer space. For an instant completely alone and unrelated she could forsee a future time when she'd be dead and everyone who'd ever known her would be dead. Written documents destroyed. Possessions decayed in junk yards or passed on and sold through unfamiliar hands, all her memories rubbed off them. Nanette Netherton: sucked completely into the earth, dissolved, disappeared.

Raymond and Rose painted a bedroom the color she wished, moved in her furniture. She recovered slowly. And she discovered activity in directing the house. Summertime, Rose foolishly let windows stand open, making Nanette susceptible to draughts; she had them closed. Chair cushions were left sunk and dented with embarrassing impressions; she set Rose to plumping them after they'd been sat on. The newspaper boy threw their morning paper on the roof, but such pranksters could not be encouraged. Cecil had always bought a paper every day, so did Raymond from then on. Over the windows the Venetian blinds, faded to a yellow-tinged ivory, remained half-lowered to protect the lovely davenport upholstery. Pots of African violets were cultivated beneath the dictionary stand. The house smelled faintly, pleasantly, of anise cookies on Sunday afternoons. It was a struggle to keep things as one's unavoidable memory demanded.

Admittedly, the living arrangement had not always seemed ideal. Once, the bathtub overflowed—gallons and gallons, it seemed. Out the door, down the hall, around the corner and half-way downstairs before anyone had noticed. Nanette did not remember having turned it on. Once all the boiling water evaporated out of Rose's white enamel teapot—the kind that doesn't whistle—and it burned black and useless. "But you should never have that kind of kettle in the first place," Nanette had said.

The new tea kettle was whistling, "Raybreakfastisready."

The whistle died slow and comically as Rose took the kettle off the burner. Raymond entered the room. He kissed his wife's cheek and smoothed Nanette's head. "Now Mother, you do know what today is, don't you?" He tightened the knot of his tie, a dark blue one with thin, diagonal yellow stripes. His remaining silver-grey hairs were smoothed wetly over his round head. The skin at his neck, loose and creased, folded into his shirt collar. He had a barrel chest, he was shorter than his wife, he smiled often, affably, understandingly. He was a gentle man and it was sad he had no grandchildren to dote on. He would have given them kisses on the head and rides on his knee, math problems and puzzles to solve with rewards from a candy dish. They would have called him "Gramps" and buried their faces in his side to smell his Old Spice odor.

Nanette pulled the bit of pear from her pocket. She held it up for Rose to see, giving her a chance to confess, then chewed it experimentally. Would they be horrified?

"She's chewing something," Raymond said.

Rose scrambled the eggs in the frying pan, one hand on her hip.

"Do you know what it is?" he asked.

With sharp enunciation Rose denounced, "Wax pear."

"Well why didn't you take it from her—she shouldn't be chewing things like that."

"Then take it from her, Ray."

The spatula went scrape, scrape, scrape as Rose scrambled and scrambled the eggs.

"Mother. That's bad for your teeth," Raymond said. "Now Mother, what do you want a wax pear for?"

Nanette ignored him, wanting some recognition from her daughter-in-law.

With a clatter Rose droppped the spatula against the pan. She moved Raymond aside and stood in front of Nanette with an open flat palm, waiting. Nanette reluctantly dropped the wax there. "You will stay three hours after school," said Rose. Or Rose might well have said. Why weren't they appalled at having tried to poison her with a wax pear? Nanette wondered. She spat, "I could have died."

"No, now everything's all right," Raymond consoled. "You just mistook—we should move that bowl of fruit anyway. It's silly. Today's your birthday, Mother. We'll have a party with cake, candles, ice cream. Maybe some streamers."

An image suddenly flashed on Nanette's mind of Raymond, as a child, being knocked down and sat upon by his older sister (who was long dead). It was amazing that a seventy-year-old man and a six-year-old boy were the same person and that she could see them side by side.

He never ties his shoes, she thought.

"Who doesn't tie his shoes, Mother?" asked Raymond, delicately. He took a swallow of orange juice which Nanette could hear go glug down his throat.

"Nothing," Nanette said. "I was thinking of Bob . . . Bob . . . now dog-gone—it, Bob what is his name?"

"I don't know, Mother. Where did you know him from?" He always prompted in what he thought was a helpful, soothing manner, but only made Nanette feel she'd said something foolish.

"That young boy who used to deliver our paper. It was Bob Something." Nanette folded and refolded her napkin in agitation, wondering, Why couldn't she remember names?

Raymond tactfully swerved the conversation. "It's such a beautiful day out Mother. Isn't it? The first real day of Spring. Looks warm at last." He kissed the top of her head. Soon he would go out on the day's errands.

"I think maybe I'll take a walk today. Wouldn't that be nice," Nanette announced quickly.

Raymond folded all the napkins and collected the placemats. "That's a good idea. Only not alone, Mother. What do you think, Dear? Dear? I said, What do you think about taking Mother for a walk?"

"I'm not deaf!" Rose threw the dish rag in the sink. "I don't care. Fine, fine. I'll clean the house and cook the roast and bake the cake and maybe lose her out there when she refuses to come home, again."

Raymond put the placemats in the drawer and shut it. He looked at his wife. He stood behind her. "I'm sorry, Dear," he said, resting his hand on her shoulder. "Mother and I will go when I come back from the store. You have a lot to do."

Nanette slowly stood. "Don't mind me," she said. With fluttery fingers she brushed away imaginary crumbs. "Indeed, don't mind me a bit. I'll just take myself off to my room where I won't be any bother."

Possibly, probably, Rose was still irritated about an incident that had happened months ago. Months! They had gone down the block together to mail a few letters, late on an autumn day, Nanette remembered—October. Maple trees were golden and red, lit from behind by a low sun; tossing their leaves against a rich, azure sky. Bright colors, big shapes—things that would never change! The house at the end of the street had three tall pine trees in a corner of its yard. Nanette lifted back her head to see them to the top and just at that moment an arrow of geese flew honking overhead. Nanette had thought: Canada. Here was a scene from the beautiful week she and Cecil had spent on Georgian Bay.

"We're almost to the mailbox—are you tired?" Rose had asked when Nanette stopped.

"I see Cecil," Nanette had said dreamily.

"What do you mean—what are you talking about?"

But Nanette refused to look at Rose. Refused to acknowledge the Present. Wanting that moment in Georgian Bay, she stood rooted.

"I'll mail these letters and be right back," said Rose, worry at the edge of her voice.

She had mailed her letters and come back to find Nanette still looking up.

"Nanette? Is your neck stuck? Mother?"

Go away, Go away, thought Nanette.

Rose was worried. Rose was thinking Nanette was lost in the past. Gently she touched her mother-in-law's shoulder. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Fine. I'm in Canada."

Rose had wrapped her own scarf around Nanette's neck and turned up Nanette's collar. "I'll be back." She hurried as fast as possible to their house and fetched Raymond, who went out alone and successfully brought Nanette home.

"She's fine," he said. "She knows Dad is dead."

"Do you mean she was fooling me?" Rose asked.

"I don't know, Dear. She was just looking at trees."

For a fraction of an instant Nanette had put her toe in the past. Was it terrible to have silently demanded that moment of her own? No, but it was a terrible thing to have scared and deceived Rose.

Hand in pocket, Nanette found the pear still safe, and she clenched her hand around it—now sure, beyond a doubt, that Rose would like to see her dead.

Nanette caught her head with a jerk just before it rolled on her shoulder; she was sitting in her living room chair. Raymond was out again, buying some essential thing he'd forgotten earlier, Rose was baking the cake. For a long time Nanette had pretended to read, actually listening for Rose's movements. When she couldn't trust her hearing she got up and wandered, to keep an eye on her daughter-in-law. A ruined bathroom rug and tea kettle, some broken dishes, minor mishaps—what else had she done to get into this pique with Rose?

Fresh air would clear her mind.

An hour away from Rose, that was all!

Raymond hurry home before Winter blows a final breath and spoils the day.

The phone rang. Buzz buzz buzz went Rose's end of the conversation.

Nanette, suddenly alert, roused herself from the chair. Hurry, she told herself. Talk a long time, she told Rose. She opened the front hall closet. Hangers rattled when her coat, after much pulling, finally fell to the floor. She closed the door on herself to a slit and peeked through the opening, but apparently Rose hadn't heard. Now it was dark—where were her boots? "Good-bye," Rose was saying. "What? Yes, I'll tell him. What? Yes, I'll tell her too." Buzz buzz.

Just as Rose hung up the receiver Nanette tugged at the front door for the fourth time and it opened. She stepped out on the stoop.

Across the street was a garden of daffodils. Nanette fixed her knit beret on her head and step by step climbed down the stairs. Aloud she recited, "My heart leaps up when I behold . . . !" But that wasn't it. "And then my heart . . . da da di da. And dances with the daffodils." She really shouldn't stop, but it was Spring.

"Nanette—" The bottom half of Rose was inside the door, her top half leaned out.

Nanette hurried down the walk and paused at the curb to look back; Rose was fiddling with her coat. When the front door banged behind Rose, Nanette was already across the street.

"Nanette—"

A thumbnail would do the trick; Nanette cut her tiny, ridged nail into the crisp daffodil stem, which snapped partway and partway had to be torn. Walking up the street, away from their house, she had a flower.

Rose was a few paces behind. "How did you get out here so fast. Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

"You know Ray said you couldn't go alone."

"Well I'd rather do that than walk with you. When my son gets home tell him I've started without him."

For a few squares of slate sidewalk, they walked in silence; Nanette saw Rose step on every single crack.

Rose folded in her underlip and, as usual, bit it. She wore no gloves or hat. "Okay," she said, "since we're going in this direction I just want to walk around the corner to the drugstore."

"Don't mind me. If you have to get something at the pharmacy, go ahead." Go. Go.

"Why—are you tired? Please tell me if you're tired. I don't want you to get exhausted and collapse."

Nanette pretended Rose was not beside her. Nevertheless she had crossed the street too quickly and would need to stop at the pharmacy, just to catch her breath and move on.

They passed a window displayed with apothecary jars—filled red and green—and under a wooden sign with a shaving mug and brush on it they pushed in a door. A bell jingled to announce them. Peppermint penny candies, thought Nanette, those had been Cecil's childhood favorites.

"What are Cecil's favorites?" asked Rose.

Nanette stood silently in front of the candy case. She wondered if Mr. Waveland, the druggist, still remembered her. A store was only as good as its druggist and Mr. Waveland had been her mother's favorite. He had, in turn, been kind to Nanette.

"Well, will you please wait here while I get some milk?" said Rose. "I'll only be a moment."

Nanette would, during that moment, look for Mr. Waveland. Yet as she wandered the store grew terrifyingly immense—from top to bottom and side to side. It was filled: flourescent bright lights; mirrors up high at the end of every aisle; four, wide check-out chutes; shopping carts with tall red poles waving high in the air; aisles of magazines, alarm clocks, automotive supplies, toy soldiers, stationery, light bulbs, cosmetics, milk.

This was not a pharmacy!

Several gum chomping children pushed by Nanette in the Special Sales Items aisle. "Hey look at that, would ya. An old lady Moonie."

"Is she trying to sell that flower or what?"

"I bet she's a crazy bag lady."

"Pauley, go say you'll buy her flower and ask if she's a Moonie."

They pushed the littlest one forward and ran giggling to the next aisle.

"Not me!" Pauley squealed, and ran off too.

Nanette turned at a touch on her arm and dropped her flower on the floor. "I'm ready to go," said Rose.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh Mother, I'm sorry I dragged you here but we can go now. Let's go. Don't you want this flower?"

"What do you want—do you work here?"

"Nanette Netherton, I am your daughter-in-law."

Nanette held her gloves against her chest. "But I don't know you."

"Are you fooling me? Nanette, please don't fool with me this time."

"What is it you want!" Her lips were firm, her manner direct and unshakably proper.

Rose rubbed her fingers across her eyes, she put her hands in her pockets and explained, "You have a son Raymond. He is my husband. I am your daughter-in-law. You live with us. Okay, are you happy? I've made a fool of myself. Now let's just go."

"I don't think employees should harass me like this. Who is your supervisor—Mr. Waveland? I'll talk to him."

"Mother—this has gone far enough."

Nanette, with Rose behind her, mincingly approached a police officer standing by the film and camera counter. "Can I help you ladies?" he asked.

Nanette tilted back her head and said, "I'd like to report this woman to her supervisor. She's been trying to get me to leave the store."

Rose said, "Officer, this is my mother-in-law. I think she's a bit confused. Can you help me get her home? She won't come with me."

The officer, a tall broad man—balding, with a moustache—looked from one to the other with his small eyes.

"Do you know this lady?" he asked of Nanette, pointing to Rose.

Nanette said, "I do not."

"Well," he said, "where do you live, Ma'am?"

"1401, I mean—yes—1401 Culver Circle."

Rose nodded in agreement and relief. "That's where I live. We both live."

"Then Ma'am," he said to Nanette, "why don't you go home now with your daughter here."

"I don't have a daughter. I'm not going anywhere with her."

The policeman stroked his chin. "And you're sure you don't know this woman?"

Nanette was suddenly exhausted, her eyes tired and watery. What on earth was a Moonie? Had they meant she looked like a space-creature? "This has never happened to me before," she said.

"But do you know her?"

Nanette said, "No."

"Okay ladies, here's what I'll do. How about if I escort you home, see if we can straighten things out there."

"No—I'll walk," Rose offered, "since she's upset around me. Though perhaps if you were to drive her about for five minutes I'd have the time to get home and open the house."

The officer zipped up his jacket with an efficient flick of his wrist. "Hey, are you sure she belongs with you? Maybe this lady's telling the truth. You read about these things in the paper all the time—little old ladies being scammed for all they have in the bank." he grinned.

Rose gripped her paper bag until it tore at the top and she almost dropped it. "Officer, I'm about as exasperated as I could be. I may not be the nicest old lady in the world and certainly not the best daughter-in-law. But I'm no pension robber." She faced her mother-in-law. "You still say you don't know me?"

"I do not have a daughter."

"Fine, fine! Only I think you're just angry at me for something. Okay—I'm angry too. Take her away, to the station, anywhere you please." She gestured frantically at Nanette. "If she doesn't know me, I'm very content to leave her with you."

The electric doors swung open with a whoosh as Rose stepped on the mat and walked away—head down, arms folded around the paper bag pressed against her chest. She dropped the daffodil in the parking lot.

In the police car Nanette felt frightened, unclear where the officer was taking her, or why.

"What's your name, Ma'am."

"Mrs. Netherton. Mrs. Cecil Netherton. Where are we going?"

"Well if you could tell me your address again, Mrs. Netherton."

"1401 Culver Circle."

"Thank you. Nice day out, isn't it," he observed. "First real day of Spring."

But Nanette smelled only foul cigarette smoke, saw black leather seats, heard squawking noises from his radio or whatever it was. She shifted, uncomfortable, aware something was poking her in the side. Reaching inside her coat she found a wax pear in her skirt pocket.

The car stopped, the officer opened Nanette's door. His huge hand gripped her too tightly around the upper arm and she winced. "There you are, ma'am," he said, helping her out.

"Thank you." She trembled. How should she tell him about Rose?

Raymond stepped up and introduced himself. The men shook hands. "Are you all right, Mother?" he asked, his hand reaching out to stroke her head.

Nanette put her arm through Raymond's and he held her reassuringly.

"Ma'am?" the police officer inquired. "Do you know this man?"

"My son, Raymond Peter," she mumbled.

"Well if you ever need any help, Mrs. Netherton, give me a call." He winked good-humoredly.

Such a slow brain she had.

On the evening of Nanette Netherton's eighty-ninth birthday she sat down to dinner with a dull ache behind her eyes. She felt drained, having

watched Rose so closely all afternoon and taken that strange expedition. If you went looking for trouble you found it as surely as if you'd put it there.

"Have a little roast beef, Mother? No. A few potatoes? No. How about some peas? No. Mother—you've got to eat something," Raymond said.

Nanette vaguely knew this house: its size, succession of rooms, placement of furniture, its colors, smells, and sounds. More clearly she saw her long struggle to fold it around her in a manageable form. It had twisted away from her grasping and shaping hands, it had gapped at seams to let in Rose's furtive resentment. The house was an altogether uncomfortable garment.

"Good heavens, this is a birthday celebration. How about some wine," Raymond offered, cheerful. He had decorated the room with Happy Birthday balloons, pink and yellow streamers—which he had had to go back to the store to get. "The meat is perfect, Dear," he complimented his wife.

Rose smiled small. "Good, I'm glad."

"I'd have some cake, that's all I'd like," said Nanette. "Just a little piece. A little piece for a little old lady."

First, however, they made her eat one slice of meat and one potato. Then Raymond cleared the table, Rose put several candles in the cake and lit them. Raymond turned off the dining room lights so that when they carried in the cake it flickered enchantingly.

"Happy birthday dear Mother happy birthday to you."

A coconut cake after all.

Nanette with care blew out the candles, one by one. "My first coconut cake," she told, "was when I was nine. Usually Father would buy just half a cake—because Mother, you know, never baked. All her cakes fell, her pie crusts were as tough as a brown paper bag. But it was always a chocolate cake Father bought, which I didn't want nearly so much as the coconut I begged for every year. When I was nine he bought me an entire coconut cake. 'Invite all your friends,' he said, 'because that's a lot to eat.' Well. I told Arthur Pearsall I was going to have a cake that day, but that he wasn't invited since he hated me. All day long I lifted the box lid and took a lick of frosting off, just as smug as could be that it was all mine. After dinner Father asked, 'Nobody coming to help you eat it?' Everyone's sick, I told him. He brought the cake to the table and I saw that most of the frosting was gone from the sides! Just at that moment, seeing how much I'd already eaten, I felt sick. Just too sick to even have a bite of my own cake."

Rose cut her mother-in-law a glittery, sugary piece. White inside, white frosting—speckled throughout with coconut—was layered between and slathered all around.

Nanette put a bite in her mouth and swallowed. Delicious. She quickly took another bite. The cake stuck. She tried to cough. She choked.

"Mother?" Raymond threw down his napkin and hurried to her side. He patted her back, harder and harder. Rose ran to the kitchen for water.

Finally the piece dissolved and went down. A vile, bile taste burned Nanette's throat. Her eyes watered and her ears rang with a high-pitched tone.

"Are you all right?" Raymond asked. He handed her the water glass. Nanette took a swallow. She nodded yes.

"Sure?" Rose added.

But Nanette refused to look at her daughter-in-law, even as Rose helped her upstairs to lie down. Rose untied her shoes and took them off. "Rest a bit. Here's another glass of water on your bedside table. Ray and I will be downstairs. What's this?" Straightening Nanette's skirt, Rose pulled out from her pocket the wax pear. She sighed and put it beside the water glass.

"I don't understand what it is with the pear, Mother. You were the one who gave these to me as a gift. Years ago. Remember?"

Nanette turned her head away. Still Rose wouldn't leave, only straightened her sweater over her hips, shifted her weight on the bed and cleared her throat.

"I don't know whether you were fooling me or not today. But I don't care. I'm just tired of this. Mother? Maybe tomorrow we can talk. Find a solution . . . to something. I don't know what. Maybe we just can't live with each other."

She put Nanette's shoes on the floor, reset the glass on the table.

Softly, the door closed after her.

Nanette stared at the ceiling. She closed her eyes. She opened them and stared again at the ceiling. She breathed shallowly. She felt itchy, uncomfortable, and could not lie still. Then it was a little while later. A phone was on Raymond's desk, in his study. On the phone was a sticker that listed all the important phone numbers one would need in an emergency. Nanette sat in Raymond's chair and looked at the numbers. Police. Fire. Neighbors'. Ambulance. Who to call? What to say? After all, Rose was her daughter-in-law, and she, also, suffered. Perhaps it was not correct to say Rose had tried to poison Nanette, if she herself had given Rose the pears. Had she? Nanette did know Rose probably wouldn't mind if she died, but was that, after all, so unreasonable? An old old woman, she did not need to do or to have.

Nanette rounded her back in Raymond's chair and with a shrug let their house fall away from her. Immediately a window creaked open a crack. Cushions dented. The Venetian blinds flew up to let in a faint orange glow of sun, and swirls of dust settled comfortably. The house, with a long, loud, falling sigh, collapsed around Nanette—leaving her sitting in a study chair untouched.