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Far Enough from Heaven

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Far Enough from Heaven

I had her hold the yellow crystal in her left hand. It wasn't real, but I didn't think she knew this. "Topaz," I said. "It will calm you down." I offered her tea and was glad she refused it. Barely enough for the three of us. I could see by her nothing frame she had no trouble refusing things. Bony, spacey woman smothered in beads—around her neck, her wrists, dangling from her hair. It was as though she were trying to make up for her stringiness, with all the beads and African wraps. It was easy to tell she had money, that she wasn't from Baltimore, that she felt herself superior to the typical black girl from this town. These native girls like to wear their hair high, oily beehives, shiny minarets, fins, tails, ropes as glossy as the haunch of a well-fed cat. They like pants so tight the zippers grin and skirts so short you would think they were wearing halter tops over their hips. And they all have children, it seems to me. Few have husbands.

No, this one, despite her blackness, seemed almost the opposite of her sisters, even the Muslimas. Even the ones of her class, who dressed for 1962. She was no Muslima, this skinny girl, for her arms were bare, she dripped with jewelry, she smoked. When she stepped into my studio, I sent Miriam for the ashtray and matches. I wanted this woman to stay for a long time, you see. Seeing her, day after day after day hitting all the expensive stores on The Avenue—Mud and Metal; Oh! Said Rose; Rock, Paper, Scissors; Modern Antiques; In Watermelon Sugar—I felt myself slighted. Usually, I charge by the hour, twenty, thirty, whatever I can squeeze from them. But this one, when I learned she was a professor of popular culture at Hopkins, that she was thirty-six and unmarried and childless, was named Regina, was born and raised in, of all places, Oklahoma, well, I decided she would pay a dollar for every minute she spent with me. Regina, she was, not Del Monte or Celica, or Phantasmagoria, or Moldavia. "You don't need to squeeze the crystal, dear," I told her. "Just let the stone do its work while I shuffle the cards."

"What's your rate?" Her voice was dead metal. I told her, and she didn't blink. I knew she wouldn't; I'd see her at the ATM across the street like a little bird at a fountain, three or four times a day. She liked cash.

"You're very sad. You fear losing your man."

“Already lost him. Right now, I want you to tell me when would be the best time to kill him.”

I have to tell you I was ready to show her the door when she said this, and had she not been reaching for her bag, I would have. Before I could say one word, she had her wallet out and slid out three bills so new I could smell them. I decided...no, there was no decision. Who am I kidding? Miriam had lost her job at Red, White and Blue, Mother was showing signs of immortality after the surgery, Miriam's father hadn't sent a check for three months. We needed everything, from toothpaste to rice to toilet paper to rent. I was sick to my stomach of squeezing dimes from these poor junkie women with their fried yellow hair and their acid-washed dungarees. I am out on the street every day—practically on my knees with these women: “I have such wonderful news for you today, Debbie. Won't you come in? Mrs. Cowan, God bless, I dreamed of you last night.”

Miss Regina, I thought, You go ahead and kill this man, but not before you give me six hundred sixty minutes and the names and numbers of all your university friends. I handed Regina the cards, held out my hand for the crystal, and said, “Now, you shuffle, and as you do, think about your man.” So while she smoked and shuffled, I too thought about him. No problem guessing about her troubles with him. When they first moved into this neighborhood, I saw them together all the time. In December they moved down the sidewalks as close as three-legged racers. They frequented Holy Frijoles on Fridays, and on their way, he'd hug her close, whisper in her beaded ear, and she'd toss back her African-wrapped head, her horse teeth flashing. In January, they chattered and joked from the ATM to the restaurant, the steam of sexual heat rising from their shoulders. They held ungloved hands no matter how cold it was. By spring, I noticed the slump in his shoulders, and I whispered through my window, see you soon, bird-girl. I may be no more psychic, these days, than the weatherman, but I could see their future. And sure enough, more and more, March, April, May, she flutters to the ATM, and threads The Avenue, from shop to shop, buying, in the first few weeks, I'm sure, things for him: a painting from Haiti, a Mexican sculpture, funny refrigerator magnets, four-dollar cards on which she writes little poems and in which she presses spring flowers. Then later, she buys for herself. I sat behind the glass or on the stoop and watched.

At first she'd walk by our place and look no deeper into our window than her thinning face and neck. New beads in her locks, new dress, new shoes. Now and then, I'd see the man, usually in his little red car, trailing cigarette smoke. Sometimes he'd be with Regina, hands in his

pockets, a quarter step behind or ahead of her. He was thinner, too. They spoke, but without much laughter of turning of heads. They held hands, but stiffly.

Abruptly, Regina stopped shuffling, clasped the cards in one hand, and said, "Do you do spiritual cleansing?" And I couldn't contain my smile, my joy. With this one woman, I could fill my cabinets, dress my daughter, buy real crystals, better incense, candles, all those things that would make this place more attractive to more of her kind.

"It's a specialty of mine," I told her, and I looked her right in the eye, "but it costs."

"Will you come with me now?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm just on the corner, like I say."

"It would be best if you brought him here."

She folded her arms and looked down at the table. "I'm not talking about him. I'm talking about her."

I tried not to frown. I said, "You're telling me his woman lives with you?"

"She stays in his room."

What a strange, foolish featherhead, I thought to myself. She comes to me to toss out his woman, when all she need do is brandish a knife, spatter her face with hot grease, call the police, swing a big stick. Of course Miriam's father never had the spine to bring any of his bitches into our home, but if he had done so I would have scalded his face and shaved her hair and set her clothes on fire. And his. I would have burned that house down to ashes. But far be it from me to talk sense to a woman who could octuple my income for two months, six months, what have you. I imagined the next card I'd pull would be the Fool.

She leaned over, reached for her bag, and as she rose to place it on the card table, I smelled rotting fruit just beneath the sweet oil she undoubtedly wore on her pulse points. It was a large bag, beaded with cowry shells, beautiful and, I'm sure, overpriced. When she plunged her hand into it, I expected her to scoop out a handful of blackened banana peels. Instead, she removed a cowhide checkbook. "I don't take checks, my dear," I said.

She pinned me with her large, perfectly adorned eyes. By degrees, the whites of her eyes became pink and welled with tears. "If you knew what I was dealing with, you wouldn't quibble over how I pay you. My checks don't bounce." I felt terrible. Guilty. A thing I usually don't feel, doing what I do, particularly when it comes to her kind. Where rich people can often make honest money, poor ones must steal, yes? But I

decided, Okay, I must put seeds in the ground before I could grow and harvest. Better to be led by trust than guilt. But still, I felt for her, see? I've washed my own dress, so to speak, for a long time. Since Miriam was ten. I remember feeling so angry and helpless and sick. All the time. I never believed there'd be an end to it. But the funny thing is, in those five or six years, my heart was so open, and my soul so rich with pain, most of my readings came true. And I was specific, on the freckle. I'd say, "I see you winning a thousand if you play any five-dollar ticket before the weekend," and they would win.

"I tell you what, sweetheart," I said to Regina, "we will meet tomorrow, this time tomorrow, and you will pick me up and bring me to your house. Show me. If I think I can help, I will, and if I can, you will give me a check for three hundred dollars, which will be a down payment for the cleansing, which will be one thousand, total, if it works." She winced, but only a little.

The first card I drew for her was the Lovers. It frightened me. So perfect I worried she would think the deck was marked. Too bad it didn't fall in the reversed position because I could have told her all was lost unless we gave him potions to restore his affection. My potions are mostly mixtures of herbal tea and a healthy markup. But in the upright position, all I could say was, "This is the basis of the situation. You must resist the temptation to change. Hang onto this man no matter what." She snorted and shook her head, and this was to be expected. I had seen his eyes, seen his bizarre toddler's gait, his downward shoulders, his graying temples. But if I give the client hope, we eat better. It's that simple. As she shook her head, I could see that her earrings were more expensive than anything I owned, more expensive than the wedding band I used to wear.

I said, "The Lovers are crossed with the Emperor. It's in the reversed position. You're afraid he's using you, right?"

She looked at me with her dead eyes, and said in her dead voice, "You know something? You don't need to tell me how to keep this asshole. I want you to help me get rid of him, okay?"

"He is cheating on you, I know, but—"

"I know I must seem crazy to you, a total stranger, coming into your office, or parlor or whatever you call it, and asking you to kill her fiancé, and all that, but I'm angry, you see. Just pissed off. But I don't know what to do. We've been together four years and everything was fine—not perfect, you know—we fought, but.... We move into this neighbor-

hood...that house right around the corner, across from the church?
3600 Chestnut?

“Is he—”

“Something’s wrong with the place. Wrong-wrong. If I were a Catholic, I’d see a priest. If I were an atheist, I’d see my shrink and take so many of her pills I’d go numb enough to ignore what’s going on. I’m neither religious, nor atheistic, but there’s something so wrong in that house, you’d have to be dead not to notice.” She drew in her breath as if she might say more, but she only inhaled, and we were quiet for what seemed like one whole minute. I listened to the traffic on The Avenue, and the drunken crowing of Sylvia and Beth, mother and daughter, best friends, fat friends, drunk friends, who sleep with the same three or four men, and don’t yet know it. They were apparently sitting on my stoop, or the stoop of my neighbor, the Valerie Gallery.

Such a strange neighborhood, this one. Miriam tells me the newspaper says it’s being “gentrified,” which I take it to mean that it’s getting too expensive for the poor ones who’ve lived here for four generations or so. Up the street and around the corner, where Regina lives, I’ve noticed there is a grim-looking Japanese couple. I never see them walk this street. They wear nice clothes and look like students. There is also an Asian and white couple, both short, both stylish, whom I see in the pricier restaurants but rarely in the shops. Then there’s the Indian couple, poor as me, who sell mostly sugary and salty snacks to the junkies and overweight girl-mothers. Regina and her man are the only blacks who actually live in this neighborhood, and if anyone spends in all the better places without fear or reservation it is she. It seems to me that most of the spenders come from other places.

I sent Miriam out to collect plantain grass and other weeds after she came home from school next day. She bundled them with string and dried them in the oven. They’d do for the cleansing herbs I’d use on the man. As long as they had that herby stink that’s so popular these days, it didn’t matter what I used. I collected my crystals, put them in a Crown Royal sack. I wrapped my cards in a silk scarf and dressed myself in white. I wished for a holy look. While I was fastening my earrings, Mother, who was sitting at the kitchen table, kept staring at me, angrily, I thought at first, but then her face coiled into the usual thousand lines of nasty joy, the same face she used after Miriam’s father had been gone for three days, then three weeks, and then three whole moons. I finished with my earrings before I said to her, “What? What, old woman, you think I can’t feed us?”

She shrugged, grunted. “Fake,” she said. “All fake.” I could feel heat rise from my face, and wetness in my eyes.

“Maybe you’d like to feed yourself?”

She pursed her lips and said, “You know, like I do... little girl. Believe heals. Have believe in a stone, and you are healed, no? You were stupid to take a check. A man believe, and he will pay. He don’t believe, and he walk away.”

“She’s the one writing the checks, Mother.”

She shrugged, looked from one end of the kitchen to the other. “What do you got, Estelle?” she said, and I realized she was speaking American so that Miriam would overhear and understand everything. She raised her arm, and slowly waved it from left to right. “You got noothing. See? Noothing. They will see your plastics, and your dirty floor, and your second-hen dress, they will say to theirself, ‘What she can give me?’ The woman, she—”

“We eat, don’t we?” I was feeling calm, the way I’d feel before going to church. But I could no longer look at her face, particularly the ugly mole on the tip of her nose. I looked at the beaded curtain. “You want the Playboy Mansion, Mother, go buy a swimsuit.”

She slapped her hand on the table. I winced but still wouldn’t look at her. “What are you, Estelle?”

“Mother, you just told me I’m fake. We know this. This is nothing new.”

“What are you, girl?” I knew what she was getting at, but I shrugged and looked at my watch. “Are you Gypsy?”

“This again!”

“What are you, girl? Eh?”

I spun on her and thrust my red face so close to hers I could have kissed her. I could have bitten the mole off her nose. I didn’t raise my voice, but I could feel the strings in my neck, and my eyes were hot. “We eat,” I said. “We eat. We eat. We eat. We eat.” A drop of my spittle closed her left eye, and I stood up straight. I spoke in our language, so I’d be clear, and she’d be clear, and there’d be no mistake. “A coin in an empty can makes a lot of noise, old woman. A lot of noise. I’ve clothed and fed and cared for you ever since Father died, and you’ve done nothing but spit in my palm and rattle like a coin in a can. You want to live elsewhere, go. You want to live with me and my dirty floors, show a little gratitude.”

I collected my things and went out. I sat on my stoop and waited for Regina. She wasn’t supposed to show up for another twenty minutes, so I watched two fat teenaged girls eating ice cream as they juddered

down the sidewalk. One of them pushed a stroller in which sat her fat, ugly child. The baby had a big, square head and bright blue eyes that already had that mean and aloof look that everyone in this neighborhood wears. The pink ring around his lips showed he'd already devoured his ice cream, and I was a little surprised he wasn't squawking, twisting around in his seat, reaching with his white fingers and begging for a taste of his mother's cone.

The children of this place grow up on bologna and sugar. They quit school at twelve or thirteen and spend their time trailing up and down these streets. They haul stolen cement statues in stolen grocery carts down to the post office parking lot, for some reason, and with hammers, they smash the cement to pieces. They hole up in abandoned buildings at night, but eat and watch TV at home all day. They buy, sell, trade—drugs, video games, guns. The boys seldom get fat, the girls almost always do. A few go to college, or become cops or hairdressers or retail clerks, but few of them ever live more than a stone's throw from the places they grew up in. Homebodies, they are. They're in love with this place. They may abuse one another, but they rarely break a window or write graffiti here. Houses are handed down by generation and only fall to strangers because of the drugs, or too many jailings and deaths. They believe in little; only this place means anything to them. Still, some of them come, but it's like pulling out a boar's tusk with your teeth. Day upon day I pace my window like the pent-up, unhappy Gypsy seer I've become. My brown skin and funny accent are all I have.

The idea is to spend as little time with them as can be managed, to take as much money as I can, and give them good news, numbers, interpret their dreams, and give them a pinch of bad news. No bad news repels them. I actually do wish them well. Naturally, if good things happen, they come back to me, but I feel for them, too. How can you not when you know them like a priestess knows her flock? I know the girl who keeps secret her boyfriend's murder. I know exactly where his body is hidden, and who did it and why. I know a woman who dreams every few nights of strangling her children, and the husband who doesn't know that not one of the children he's supporting is his; the girl who plays the lotto from hush money she gets from her uncle; the old woman with cancer who won't go to a doctor. That one lives on black-market Seconal and Kools. Perhaps if their awfulness or nastiness were to rub off on Miriam, I would hate them, but Miriam hardly notices them. But I think they think I have the power to curse them, being a Gypsy and all.

Regina showed up only a few minutes late. She wore blue jeans, bracelets, and a black long-sleeved shirt with the cuffs rolled up. I'd never

seen her dressed like this, and I wondered whether it had to do with her boyfriend. Was he gone already? It was a short walk to her house, a block or so, so we talked only a little as we walked. She told me I looked nice, and I asked her if she had faith. She shrugged. I asked her if her man was home, and she said, “No, but she is.”

“Is she a friend of yours?”

“I don’t think she’s anyone’s friend.” Two skateboarders rolled by, as we rounded the corner, and I felt my stomach frog-kick me when I could actually see her house at the end of the row. “Let me ask you something. Why do you let her stay in your home? It is your home, isn’t it?”

“She doesn’t give me any choice.”

I could not stop my mouth, so I said, “Why are you so weak?” I was walking slightly behind her at this point and was watching her hair swing. It exposed the back of her thin neck, and I imagined slamming that twig with my fist till it snapped. It was only weeks later that I realized I hated her for being too much like me. On the nights or mornings or mid-afternoons when Miriam’s father slouched into the house, smelling of liquor and women, pot, quick showers, I said nothing, neither hello, nor where have you been, nor die, you low maggot. I believed, at the time, my silence would both freeze and burn him, but he must have assumed we were co-conspirators. He often came in when I had a client up in the storefront, so I didn’t always see him for an hour or so, but I would hear him laughing and talking with Mother, or teasing Miriam, who, I suppose I must add, loved him then, loves him now. He’d open the fridge, open a beer, open the paper, all with a holiday of noise, proud of his ways. Skulking, sidling, creeping—not for this man. At the times he came in when I was elsewhere in the apartment, he’d lay it on even more heavily, pinching my cheek, hooking my chin with his pointer finger, saying, “You okay, my flower?”

“Sure, sure,” I’d say. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?” No doubt in my mind—if I’d kicked his balls, or spooned out his eyes while he slept, he’d have stayed. He liked women with ugly hearts. He’d have said to me, “Now there’s a woman!”

Regina led me up the stoop and into the place without a word. But as I turned to close the door, she said, “Well, I hired you because I am weak.” She held herself at such an angle that her head looked particularly large and her neck thin. She looked like a picture of one of those beautiful starving African women, eyes large and serene, eyes that can already see paradise and nothing of this world. I felt cruel and stupid. I stared at the walls and furnishings until my pulse subsided.

The whole first floor was a single room, divided by Japanese screens. No antique furnishings, no leather-bound books and chairs, no Greek busts and statuettes, none of the things I thought would fill a professor's house. There were bookcases, but they were filled with toys, mostly colored ones: Mr. T, Steve Urkel, the Cosby Kids, even black Simpsons, black superheroes, black aliens, a black Zorro. There were dolls that looked as though they were modeled on some of the people of Baltimore, complete with the falling-down pants, the bottles wrapped in paper bags, the peculiar tight-fitting scarves. There were more dignified and more strange things, too: Santeria candles; colored bottles; a black Ken doll in a three-piece suit, nailed to a cross; African rag dolls; and those mammy salt and pepper shakers, which are, in my opinion, very strange things for a black person to own. The dolls were so numerous and colorful that it took me a little longer than it ordinarily would have to notice the smell of rotting fruit and the flies that clung to the ceiling, the walls and windows, as well as the door we had just come through. It astonished me how unclean this woman was. Of course, she noticed how my attention had moved from the shelves to the ceiling, and she said, "I can't get rid of them no matter what I do. They only hang out here on the first floor, which is strange, because she never sets foot down here, so far as I know."

I felt uncomfortable asking, but I said, "Is this her smell?"

Regina's eyes grew larger than usual, and she drew her head back as though she was going to look up at the ceiling. She frowned. "Oh. Oh, that," she said. "Let me show you." She walked straight back to the kitchenette and waited for me. There were flies in the kitchenette, but none lit on the fruit in a big yellow bowl on the counter. The fruit was so fresh it glowed. Regina pulled a knife from the rack, lifted a squash from the bowl, set it on the cutting board, and sliced it down the middle. I smelled it before I saw it, a gush as strong and sweet as baby shit; the blade was covered with the slimy guts of fruit so far gone that the half-sprouted seeds were semi-melted in decay.

This, this told me everything. Where she was, where I was, what she had brought me into. I felt the floor of my belly fall to my lap, my palms and face and neck misted with my own moisture. I wanted to say, Why didn't you tell me? Why were you so coy? You brought me into a dead house. Did you know that? What do you want me to do about this? Can't you see how fake I am? I practically beg you to see it, don't I, with all my talk of prosperity and good tidings, from amid my own dead house? These people, all these people we live among? What can they

see? Can you blame them? But, you, you are a *professor*, bless God. Can a professor be such a fool?

Your type can see me, why can't you?

I said nothing, of course. That's my way.

"So many things I could tell you," she said, "story after story. The only 'normal' things in this place are the rats in the walls. This is Baltimore; I understand rats." She twirled the knife round and round as she said this, and though it was a little sad, I chuckled. Then she pointed the knife at me and said, "Like it all started one morning when his sweater and my hair and robe caught on fire."

"Oh my God."

"No, no... No one was hurt, but it was just weird how he's upstairs in his room, waving a match out, after lighting his cigarette, then he shuts out the light and sees his whole chest glowing. His sweater's on fire, a quick orange flame. Didn't hurt him a bit. It just floated on the fine hairs of his sweater, and—"

"You don't share a room?"

She lifted her chin just a bit and looked me in the eyes. "Do you see what I'm saying," she asked me in a surprisingly deep voice.

"I do, I do," I said, but I didn't.

"And then he's not even all the way down the stairs—you know, he's going to tell me the weird thing that's just happened, and before he opens his mouth, I yell up at him, 'I just put my robe out. It was on fire!'"

"So he looks at me funny, and I say, 'I was on fire. You know, the robe... while I was wearing it!'"

"And he said, 'Me too. Just now.' And he said, 'Were you smoking?' and I said, 'I was making toast.' I explained to him how I'd been leaning over the toaster, and—I don't know, maybe one of my braids touched the grill thingy, and the braid touched my robe—I don't know, but next thing I know I'm dancing around the kitchen and slapping my right sleeve."

She looked me in the eyes again, and I'm pretty certain I made a face, but I didn't have any idea what it was. I couldn't feel my own face. Does that even make sense? But you see, the smell was so bad, I must have been wincing, and her voice so smooth and her face so beautiful, I must have been smiling, and the story so odd, I must have looked doubtful.

Regina set the knife on the counter, and a fat fly started and flew slow as syrup across the room and alit next to another fat fly, and this one, too, moved so slowly I could almost count its wing beats. I could have pulled it from the air with my hand. "So many things I could tell you,"

she said. "Like when the neighbor kept pounding on our wall, complaining about our noise and so forth—"

"What kind of noise?"

"Sex, of course. He heard people having sex whether there had actually been sex or not."

"Excuse me, but—"

"Did we make noise? Naturally, but not that...If we had had that much sex..."

In the silence, I lit a cigarette. She handed me an ashtray, folded her arms and leaned against the counter. I cleared my throat and pawed through my bag as though I wanted to check my things. I was going to tell her she had misunderstood me. I wasn't going to ask about her sex life. I was going to ask her for some tea. But to a psychic, people will tell anything. And as if she were the mind reader, she asked me whether I would like tea or coffee. How could I refuse? The water was already on, and I assumed it was for me. There were cookies, too, but what with the smell, I could only force one down to be polite. They were the expensive ones that never taste like much and have too little butter. We stepped into the dining area with the tea and things, and we sat. She said, "So after a couple weeks of pounding and yelling, my partner—"

"Excuse me. May I ask his name?"

She shook her head subtly, quickly, and said more with a moan than with words that she would prefer not to. No need to explain, I thought.

She looked down at her lap for a moment. Her hands lay in her lap. They looked like two fish. Dead ones, you know? And then her right hand began to fiddle with her left. She crossed and uncrossed her legs, and then she folded her arms over her breasts, looked me in the eye and said, "I want to show you something I've never shown anyone. Not a soul, okay?"

I nodded.

She plucked off all the rings on her fingers, four on her right, and the engagement ring on her left, and under each one, there was a dark-green stain, as though these rings of silver and gold were made of copper or the cheapest brass. She showed off the green rings like a model, turning her delicate hands this way and that. She scooted her chair closer to me. "Look close," she said. So I did. I lowered my face inches from her right hand but did not touch. It was lichen, or fur, or green hair. My mouth tasted of iron and filled with spittle. I felt my face color.

"Did he call the police?"

"What?"

"The neighbor? People always call the police when there is noise."

“Five times in three days, but on the last time the police threatened to cite him for wasting their time.”

I asked her if there were rats in the walls, and she asked me if I'd been listening, and then I asked her if she ever heard the noises, and she nodded and said, “Eventually.” And as she began to replace the rings she said, “Obviously, I can't get the stuff off. Bleach, scrub brushes, witch hazel, rubbing alcohol.”

We were quiet for a fairly long moment, and then she said, “My fiancé's name is Barry. He used to be the smartest person I know, and now he's just stupid. He used to play jazz on the bagpipes, read bad science fiction, eat a can of palm hearts a day, and he always seemed like the coolest, baddest, hippest nerd in the world to me. Last couple months he hasn't done any of those things, and he now seems incredibly strange to me: arguing with neighbors, acting depressed. I was with him until he started smelling like another woman and beating off in bed right next to me.”

I told her I didn't know what that meant, and when she told me, tears came to my eyes. It was only a little and only because it embarrassed me. It was also because it made me think too much and feel too much. Regina cleared her throat, as if to get my attention. “When he's here, he sleeps with her in the back bedroom, though it's hardly bigger than a shoe box. She's always there, more or less, always spread and ready, I imagine.” She sipped her tea, frowned. “I realize he may never come back. I realize if she goes, he goes, but I want her gone.” She pointed up at the ceiling when she said this. She lowered her hand and then drummed her plum nails, one, two, three, four on the table, lifted up her tea, and sipped. “Like me to go up with you?”

“I will go alone.”

She sat back and nodded. “I'll be doing the dishes,” she said.

The stairwell split the middle of a large room. Books everywhere, like wallpaper. The right half of the room had two red leather chairs and an old couch with animal legs and crushed red velvet cushions. There was a coffee table of eggplant-colored wood polished so well it looked heavy as marble. A little stone waterfall sat on the table. The room smelled sweet, like dry roses and ginger, and in the light that slanted to the right side of the two large windows that faced the street, I saw a string of incense smoke rising from the burner on the floor. On the other side of the room were a bed, a closet, a dresser, a short hallway, and a door. I set my bag on the table, removed the herbs, a blue bottle of rose water, matches, a little ceramic bowl, two half-used candles, and my prayer

book. I dried my nervous hands on my dress. I burned a bundle of herbs and set it in the bowl, took up the bowl and walked toward the hallway, past the foot of the bed on the left, the bookshelf on the right, until I stopped at the mouth of the hallway. Six more steps or so, and I would grasp the doorknob, enter the room, and blow on the herbs until the room was pale with smoke, and I would stand there in my white dress, call on God and all the mysterious powers, and curse the whore until she tore from the room as though on fire. I have done this sort of thing before. Two years ago, I frightened a boy enough to get him to stop stealing from his mother. And the year Miriam's father left me, I saved another boy from drugs. I told him his younger sister would be dead in a month and that he would die one year later if he didn't stop with the pipe. The girl did die, in exactly four weeks, and the boy is clean.

Six steps or so. But all I could do was stand there as my heart made my body sway like a reed. My tongue was of clay. From where I stood, I could see the bathroom off to the left in the middle of the hallway, and I thought, Good, I might need you in a minute or two, because then I began to lose the smell of the incense and the herbs, and my head filled with the smell of decaying fruit—acrid, sour, sweet—a horn of melted cantaloupe, hoary apples speckled with mold, the black blood of plums puddling on the reptilian skins of nectarines, oranges so soft and brown a light touch would sink a finger down to the second knuckle. But back of that hideous smell lay something hot and fleshy and feminine, of tampons bundled in toilet paper and stuffed into the bottom of a rubbish bin, of unwashed underarms stroked by deodorant, and of the low, ratty burn of a man's balls, of waste beneath the tongue, of an unprobed navel, of filthy underwear, of soil behind the ears, of the yellow pudding between the teeth, of waxy pores, of every unsanctified crease and fold and nook and corner and crypt of the body, of oily, of dark, of wicked, of waterless, of loveless, of low. Deep in the way an abscess is deep, and webby, warm.

Then, from behind the door, she spoke incongruently, sprightly. From behind the door, she said, "Hi!" She said, "Hi!"

All right, all right, I'll go in. But the thing was that I hadn't only heard the voice from behind the door, but from behind my own ear. And it sounded like the negative of sound—empty and sharp as a needle. A metal cricket. A kind of bell that took a long time to fade away. She said it only once, but I heard it three hundred times as I stood there. Behind the door and behind my own ear.

I moved all the way into the hallway and took the doorknob in my hand. Her voice chirped in my head, and I'm holding the knob, and the

veins in my neck I feel thumping the collar of my dress. I turn the knob. I push open the door. The room smells of some husband's lover, and some husband's underarms, and it is empty of any person—small as a walk-in closet, lit by sun, a bed, a desk and computer, a pair of running shoes—you know, a room.

I smelled her before I saw her. The woman smell, and the smell of flies and fruit, rose like steam, and it warmed my face, and it was such a mix of things that tears filled my eyes. I felt cold in my chest. I lowered my head. As the tears bled away, there she was, naked before me on the bed. "Oh God," I said. Her skin was melon white. Her arms were in the front of her, twisted together like roots and plunged between her thighs. She shivered and hunched her thin shoulders. Her peach-colored hair was short, above the ears. "Hi," she whispered.

"This is shameful," I told her. I could barely breathe. "You have to get out."

She shrunk even further into herself. Her skin erupted into the threaded texture of cantaloupe peel, and I said to her, "As the melon rots, so should you." But I was cold and terrified.

She opened her mouth, as if to speak, but only seed and pulp fell out. A large fly wafted slowly from her nose, and she threw her head back, eyes wide. She must have wanted to scream. She must have been embarrassed and alarmed. "You see?" I said. "Do you see?" My voice was still small, my chest colder, my face hotter. My sour mouth. My turning stomach. My own alarm. My own shame. "Just go. Just leave us alone," I said.

"Hi," she whispered again. Green seeds slid down her chin. She dropped her head and began to sob. Her skin vanished and I saw only her bones, then only her veins, then just her muscle, and then her yellow yellow fat, then the skin grew back to white and smooth, and then green-pink and beaded with needle tracks along her arms and thighs, and then it grew peach sweet and milky, like a little girl's skin. Then it was dead, gray and dead. Then it was alive again, and then settled into something neither dead nor alive. She said, without looking at me at all, "He's gone because of you." Once again, the sound struck behind my ear. My body rippled with chicken flesh. And then she pinned me with her eyes, and said again, "He's gone, gone, gone because of you."

I laid the smoking saucer on the floor. Everything in me and on me beat and throbbed and pulsed and shook and thrummed and buzzed, and I threw up at her white feet. Soiled my white dress. I began to weep.

Between the time it took me to turn around and tremble back to the other side of the room and sit on the animal-leg couch, the odors faded

a bit, but still I couldn't smell anything but the two of them in a field of rotting fruit. Couldn't even smell the rose oil on my own wrists and throat. And the lemon-yellow voice also began to fade, though for quite a while it was hard to hear anything else. I left all my things on the table, except for my bag, which I placed on my lap, my knees clasped together. I sat there opening my ears to the sounds of Regina washing her dishes, straining to hear only her. It might as well have been the singing of angels. I breathed in, and I breathed out again, and if I focused, I could catch a wisp of incense, or a bubble of dish soap, but I could not expel, completely, the woman from my nose, and I could not stop her voice, completely. She said hi to me from behind the closed door and from behind my ear.

I sat until enough time had passed. I went downstairs and collected my fee. I told Regina I would be back in three days for another session. She looked grateful, of course. I left feeling all right in a sweaty sort of way, a rattling sort of way. My stomach was a knot of gristle. My heart wasn't beating at all. Out there on the street, I squinted across The Avenue at the face of my home. I imagined slapping cash down on the Formica; I imagined saying to her hideous face, "Look here, old woman. Look at that. And look at me. Look at my dress, my hands, my face. I am real! Everything I do is real. I am exactly what I say I am. Now thank me. You thank me, you old dead thing!"

But life is neither dream nor wish. When I got home, I sat alone in the kitchen, my eyes shut, my bag in my lap. I couldn't cry anymore; my heart had yet to beat. After a while Mother limped up behind me and placed her old paw on my shoulder. I opened my bag and handed her the check. Though blind, I could feel her study it, and she exhaled, through her nose, her approval. She patted me on the shoulder three quick times, and, I assume, folded the check into the pocket of her housecoat.