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Uh-Oh City

By Jonathan Carroll

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity...
In my end is my beginning.
-- T.S. Eliot, "East Coker"

All right, look at it this way. If her name had been Codruta or Glenyus or Heulwen, it would have been easier to accept. Some exotic name from the Urals or Druid country, places where strange events are as common as grass. But no, her name was Beenie. Beenie Rushforth. Doesn't that sound like a fifty-year-old golfing "gal" from the local country club? It does to me. A woman with too loud a voice, too deep a tan, and too much bourbon in her glass at eleven in the morning. Beenie Rushforth, Wellesley, class of '65. Even the way she arrived was no big deal, either. Our last cleaning woman decided to marry her boyfriend and move to Chicago. No great loss. She wasn't the world's best worker. She was the kind who swept around a rug rather than under it. My wife, Roberta, is also convinced this woman was taking nips from our liquor bottles, but that didn't bother me. What does get on my nerves is paying good money for a clean house, but getting instead secret corners of dust, and streaked windows in the guest room. She gave notice, and Roberta put a file card on the bulletin board outside the supermarket. You know, along with the "lawns mowed/German lessons/portable typewriter barely used..." signs. The place you check either when you're in need, or only bored. We can clean our house well enough, but since the kids left and I was given a chair at the university, there is more money now than ever before. I want to use some of it to make life nicer for us. Roberta deserves it. Throughout my adult life, I have had an uncanny talent for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. I specifically chose the U. of Michigan graduate program so that I could study with Ellroy, the greatest Melville scholar around. Who just happened to die six weeks after I began there. Roberta was pregnant with our first daughter, Norah, and was having her own tough time. But she was magnificent. Told me I had a full fellowship to a great school, and, Ellroy or not, a Ph.D. from the place meant something; so shut up and get to work. I did. Three very lean years later, we walked out of there with a doctorate and two babies in hand. For the next decade, we lived your typical academic vagabond's life, loading up the VW bus every couple of years and driving from one end of the country to the other to new jobs. The students liked me, but my colleagues were jealous. I was writing fast and well then, and had already knocked out the monograph on Melville's Gnosticism that sent a lot of people running to their copies of Moby Dick to see what they'd missed. Then came "Moonlight marines -- a study of the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder and Herman Melville," which should have made me a famous man, but did not. I didn't complain. I knew it was good, we were young, had our love, healthy babies, promise... what else do you need when you're that age? In Minnesota, we bought our first house and first dog. The sixties were starting to flex their muscles, so once again I chose the wrong place at the wrong time. Norah started kindergarten in New Mexico. We liked it there. The dry winters and long views to the mountains made us happy. The college was disgracefully conservative, but we had friends there, and life was comfortable.

Everyone was passionate in the sixties; everyone had something "important" to say about the state of the world. Me, too. I was one of those idiots who let their hair grow too long and demonstrated loudly against the war. That would have been fine if we'd lived in New England or California, where it was fashionable, but the Southwest was full of blind patriots and armament factories. Besides, the university was a state school, and thus tied umbilically to the government. Suffice it to say, when I came up for well-deserved tenure, it wasn't granted.

Desperate, I looked around for another job, but the only one available was at an agricultural college in Hale, Texas. God forbid you should ever spend time in Hale. We were there for four of the worst years of our lives. Pay was miserable, the kids went to a lousy school, and the other people in my department were Cro-Magnon both in their approach to education and the social graces. I almost went out of my mind. Single-handedly, I came close to ruining our marriage with my unforgivable behavior. One horrendous night, Roberta and I stared at each other across the dining room table. She said, "I never thought it would come to this." I said, "That's what happens when you marry a loser with a big mouth." She said, "I always knew you had a big mouth, but not that you were a loser. Not till now. And a mean one, too."

Unfortunately, it didn't end there, and only because of my wife's patience and goodwill did we survive. By then I was at wit's end, and the kids were so scared of my moods that they wouldn't come close unless I ordered them over. A life that had once been as interesting and rich as a good novel was turning into a railroad timetable.

Out of the blue, I was offered a position here. The department chairman was an old acquaintance from Michigan I'd kept in touch with over the years because we worked in the same field. I will never forget turning to Roberta after his phone call and saying, "Toots, pack the bags. We're goin' North."

The transition was not easy. Norah was happy in her school, things were far more expensive in the new town (partially because we never did anything in Texas, because there was nothing to do), and my teaching load was greater. But despite things like that, after six months I felt like all my veins and arteries had come unclogged. We were back in the race.

What followed was twenty years of mostly interesting days, some horrendous ones, and a general contentment that is rare. I've noticed few people say, "I have a good life." It is as if they are embarrassed or ashamed of their lucky lot, ashamed God permitted them to travel a smooth road. Not I. Five years ago I realized how blessed I was, and thought it time I began attending church. I looked around and chose one as simple as could be; a place where one could give thanks but not get choked in velvet robes and oblique ceremonies that missed the point. I am fifty-five years old, and believe God is willing to listen if we speak clearly and to the point. His responses are manifested, not in immediate answers or results, but in dots everywhere around us that need to be connected intelligently. I feel that even more strongly now because of Beenie. Despite Beenie. Bless her. Damn her.

I answered the phone the first time she called. Certain people's voices fit their looks. Big man, deep voice -- that sort of thing. My first impression of Mrs. Rushforth was middle-aged, hearty, good-natured. She said she'd seen our notice on the board and was interested in the "position." I smiled at the word. Since when had housecleaner become a position? However, we live in a time when garbage collectors are "sanitary engineers," so if she wanted it to be a position, O.K. She told me more about herself than I needed to know: she had grown children, had lost a husband, didn't need the money, but liked to keep active. I wondered if that was the truth; who cleans houses to keep their muscles toned? Why not join a gym instead and sculpt a body on gleaming silver machines? I invited her over to the house the next morning and she readily accepted. I added another word to my list of her qualities via the sound of her voice -- lonely. She sounded so eager to come. Before hanging up, she gave me her telephone number in case something went wrong and I had to cancel the meeting. As soon as I got off the phone, I went to the telephone book and

looked up Rushforth. I do things like that -- look people up in phone books, read the small print on contest offers and cereal boxes. Equal parts curiosity, nosiness, and scholarship. I am used to gathering as much information as I can on a subject, then culling what I need from it. I didn't go to the phone book because I was particularly suspicious of this Mrs. Rushforth. Only curious.

To my great surprise, the only B. Rushforth lived on Plum Hill, a charming and prestigious neighborhood down near the lake. A cleaning woman who lived there? Now I was thoroughly intrigued, and so was Roberta after hearing about the call and my little research.

"Oh Scott, maybe she'll be like Auntie Mame. Rich and eccentric. We'll have Rosalind Russell cleaning our house!"

Early the next morning, I got a call from a colleague who needed my help immediately, so I had to leave and miss the meeting with the mysterious Beenie.

When I returned at lunchtime, Roberta filled me in. "What does she look like?"

"Middle-age, middle-size, a little round, short gray hair. She looks like a masseuse."

"I thought so. How'd she dress?"

"In one of those bright running suits and complicated sneakers. She's very friendly, but also very take-charge. Know what I mean? She asked if she could look around the house before I even offered her the job. Checking out the work load.

"You did offer it?"

"Yes. Sweetie, she's nice and looks dependable: Any person who lives on Plum Hill but wants to clean houses to keep busy has got to be at least interesting, right? And if she turns out to be a good cleaner, too, all the better."

"True. Bring on the Beenie."

"She starts tomorrow."

My seminar in Hawthorne took up most of the next morning. It's a good class, full of intelligent students who appear to have a genuine interest in the work. Generally I come out of there feeling invigorated and happy to be a teacher. That day a rather heated discussion arose over certain imagery in the short story "Young Goodman Brown." In the middle of it, one fellow asked another, "Do you think you'd say all these things if you knew Hawthorne was sitting in the back of the room? You should hear yourself. Would you be so confident if you knew the guy who'd written it was listening?"

A good question I'd heard asked in a variety of ways over the years. I was thinking it over as I walked in our front door and was greeted by the familiar voice of our vacuum cleaner.

"Anyone home?"

The vacuum kept up its high roar.

"Hellllllo?"

Nothing. Then a burst of familiar laughter from the living room. I walked in and saw Roberta bunched over on the couch, cackling. My wife is a dramatic laughter -- she'll smack a knee and rock back and forth if the joke's good. It's easy to amuse her, and a pleasure, too, because she's so appreciative. I think part of the reason why I fell in love with her in the first place was that she was the first woman to genuinely laugh at my jokes. Sex is great, but making a woman laugh can be even more satisfying sometimes.

"You must be Scott. Roberta was giving me the lowdown on you." She was all gray and silver. Gray hair, gray sweatsuit, gray sneakers. Hands on hips, she looked me over as though I were a used car. The vacuum was still on and stood humming by her side. "Beenie?"

"It's really Bernice, but if you call me that, I'll quit. How do you do?"

"Very well. Looks like you two are doing O.K."

"I was telling Roberta about my son."

My wife waved a hand in front of her face as if there were a fly too close.

"You've got to hear these stories, Scott. Tell him the one about the rabbit."

Please!"

Beenie looked both pleased and shy. "Aww, I'll tell him some other time. I got to get this vacuuming done. I want to get to the windows today, but I'm still not half-done with this."

She unplugged the machine and pulled it behind her into the hall. A moment later it started up again in the dining room.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure she wasn't near. "How's she doing?" "Terrific! She's an atomic power plant. Have you seen the kitchen yet? Take a look. It's like an ad for floor wax on T.V. -- the whole room is one big gleam. You need sunglasses. I think we lucked out with her."

"That would be nice. Why were you laughing so hard?"

"Oh, because she's funny. The woman tells stories... You've got to hear her talk."

"I'll be happy if she can clean."

"That's what's great -- she does both."

New sounds filled our house that day. Pillows pounded and plumped; the vacuum cleaner hissed up against floorboards and walls that hadn't been cleaned in years. She found a window in the bathroom that had probably never known full sunlight to pass through it since the house was built thirty years ago. The dog bowls shone; curtains were washed; Roberta couldn't get over the fact that the area under the unused back bathroom sink was not only spotless, but also smelled wonderfully of an unknown new disinfectant. Beenie's answer? "When it comes to cleaners, I bring my own." My desk was dusted and the papers neatly arranged. Even the books on it were stacked alphabetically. I didn't like anyone touching my desk -- it was one of those great taboos in the family -- but I was so impressed by the detail of her cleaning that I said nothing. Neither of us knew if this whirlwind stopped for lunch. Neither of us saw her even sit down. She accomplished so much in that eight-hour period that, after she was gone, the two of us walked around our still-glowing house, exclaiming about one find after the other.

"My God, she washed the dog, too?"

"No, just vacuumed and brushed him, but did you see your shoes? They've been polished."

"And my underwear? I think she ironed them. No one's ever ironed my underpants."

"Are you trying to tell me something dear husband?"

It was an Easter-egg hunt. Who would think of cleaning invisible things like light bulbs in table lamps or the top of the saltshaker? This latter cleaning I discovered days later at breakfast. I had often looked at that object and thought about wiping the glut of white crystals away and sticking a toothpick down the holes to free up the blockage. Now it had been done, along with so much else.

God knows, Roberta and I have enough to talk about. If it's not the kids, it's our life, or our separate lives, or books, or whatever. But Beenie Rushforth was a major topic of conversation the next few days. Whether it was what she'd done or how she'd done it, somehow or other, she kept coming up. We discovered after the initial shock that not only had she cleaned, ironed, scrubbed, polished ... her way through the entire house, but also had done a myriad of small things in most rooms to organize us better. The alphabetized books on my desk, for example. In the kitchen cupboard the canned foods were ordered, the spices arranged in such a way that they were now all visible, rather than before, when they had been thrown together in a heap that needed sorting through any time one needed bay leaves or cinnamon. The ink bottle on Roberta's desk had been wiped, and the envelopes next to it sorted and arranged by color.

"This is too much."

"What?"

"Look -- the toothpaste tube's been squeezed from the bottom so it's all up in the top. You didn't do it, did you?"

"Me? You've been yelling at me for thirty years to squeeze from the bottom."

"I thought so. Roberta? Why are we so astonished by our cleaning lady?"
"Because she's amazing. And costs the same as the last one, who didn't lift a finger."
"Tell me what else she told you. How does she work living on Plum Hill?"
"It's not what you think. Apparently, it's someone's estate, but there's a small gatehouse on the edge of the property, and that's what she rents. She's been there for years, and pays very little for it. Her husband died ten years ago. He was an executive for an insurance company in Kansas City."
"I guess that explains why she said she didn't need the money: Whenever an insurance guy pops off, his family inevitably inherits a bundle because he held the best policy."
"She did say she was comfortable."
"I'll bet. And she had a son?"
"Yes, and a daughter. He sounds like a card. Get her to tell you the story about the cigars."
"O.K. You know what I've been thinking? This sounds odd, but I've been wondering what is she going to clean when she comes next week? What is there left to do?"

The basement.

"Oh Beenie, that's not necessary. It's only the laundry room and storage. We're never there."
"I went down last week to have a look, and I think it's got a lot of possibilities if you want to use them. I'll need only a few hours, and we'll have everything ready and right."
Roberta said, for the rest of that morning until I came home for lunch, she heard the most disconcerting mix of sounds coming from that pit. Which is what it is, truth be told. The dark at the bottom of our stairs; the once-a-week-descent-with-a-basket-of-laundry-under-your-arm ordeal when there are so many other things you'd rather be doing.
In our house, there are two places to purposely misplace things -- attic and basement, in that order. If you vaguely want to keep something, but have little desire to see it for a while, disappear it into the attic. If you don't ever want to see it again, but have neither the heart nor guts to make the big break and toss it in the garbage, travel it to the basement. The land of damp shadows and dead suitcases. If it had been up to me, I would have detached that bottom part of our house like the first stage of a rocket once it's reached a certain altitude. With the exception of the ten-year-old washing machine, the only function the basement served was as momentary memory flash now and then of kids stomping around down there, yelling across hide-and-seek or monster games. Our children were grown and gone. When they came to visit, their own were still too young or uninterested to play there.
A house closes down on you as you grow older. Because you need less space, the rooms once filled with life accuse with their closed-door stillness: you gave me life, but now you've taken it away. Where are the kids, the parties, the noise and movement and things resting on the floor a moment? No one's ever reflected in the mirrors anymore; there are no teenage-perfume or warm-chicken-dinner smells in the unused dining room. You have nothing for me? Then I damn you with my quiet, the objects that never move, the things that stay clean too long.

I call it the creeping-museum syndrome -- everything we own becomes more museumlike the older one gets, including ourselves.

"Uh-Oh City!"

I forgot to mention this. The floorboards between the ground floor and basement in our house are not thick. The first time I heard that loud and strange exclamation coming from down below, I looked to my wife in her chair nearby for enlightenment. We were eating lunch, and, by coincidence, both of us happened to be holding potato chips in midair.

"What is 'Uh-Oh City'?"

"That seems to be her war cry when she finds something interesting."

"Oh. I take it, that means I'll be seeing her soon? The egg salad is very good today. There's something new in it."

"Horseradish. Beenie gave me the recipe. Isn't it good?"

"Scott, you're back! What are these?"

"Hello. They're old New Yorker magazines, as you can see."

"I saw, all right. You want to keep them, or what? I found 'em down the cellar, but half are so rotten they don't even have print on them anymore." She was right, but the scold in her voice reminded me of Miss Kastburg, my insufferable first-grade teacher. That was not a good memory.

"Beenie, you're here to clean the house, not clean it out. Leave the magazines, O.K."

"Even the rotten, ones? I could sort through 'em and --"

"Even the rotten ones. I like rotten. I turn the pages more carefully."

"You're an odd one, Scott."

"Thank you, Beenie. Just leave the magazines."

She reappeared several other times, holding mysterious or forgotten objects at arm's length, wanting to know if they could be thrown out. On each occasion, Roberta and I enthusiastically agreed they could.

The last time she trudged up, the stairs sounded heavier, more weighed down. No wonder -- she had a television on her head, and looked like an African woman carrying her pot to the well.

"My God, Beenie!"

"Oh Beenie, what are you doing?!"

"Bringing up treasure! Do you folks realize what you've got here? This's a Brooker television. These things are collector's items! Some people say the Brooker was the best TV set ever made in America. Strong as a Model T Ford." My wife and I exchanged smirks. "That was the first TV we bought, and it was terrible from the moment we got it. Nothing but trouble. How many times did it break down?"

Roberta looked at Beenie and shrugged as if the breakdowns were her fault. "At least five. Remember that terrible fat man who used to come and fix it?"

The memory of his Vandyke bearded face came to me like a blastful of exhaust from a dirty truck. "Craig Tenney! I remember the name written in yellow on his blue overalls. The worst! The only pompous TV repairman in the world. Not to mention the fact that he was also a crook Beenie, put that thing down. You'll hurt yourself."

"Nope, that's not true. Once you get it up on the head, your neck'll pretty much support anything. Waddya want to do with it? Don't leave it downstairs. I'm telling you, whether it works or not, it's worth a good chunk to a collector."

"Well then, it's yours if you'd like to have it."

She looked at me appraisingly. "How come you kept it if you don't want it?"

"Probably because I was too lazy to cart it to the dump. Really, if you want it, take it."

"You've got a deal. I know a man who'd be interested."

I hadn't laid eyes on that set for years. It had lived so long in the basement that even if I had seen it, I didn't remember because it had grown invisible. Objects have a way of doing that when they are broken or serve no more function in our lives. Yet seeing it again like that in the light of day, returned once more to the middle of our living room where it had once owned the eyes of an entire family, I found myself remembering things about that set. Like the awful repairman who used to pontificate to me about the state of the world while purportedly fixing the damned machine.

There were also nice memories. Like the whole gang of us sitting around that tube after dinner, eating hot-fudge sundaes and watching "Laugh-In" or "Star Trek." Unlike others, I've never had any real objection to television besides its basic silliness. When I was growing up, we listened religiously to silly shows on the radio, so what's the difference? Our kids were always devoted

readers and decent students. If they liked to plop down in front of the set for an hour or two after school or a football game on the weekend, O.K. I was often there next to them, enjoying both the show and their company. It also came back to me that the first time any of the kids ever asked a question about sex came while watching that television. In the middle of the "Dick Van Dyke Show" one night, Norah informed us she'd heard from a girlfriend that babies were made when men and women went to a hospital, lay down on separate beds, were connected genital to genital by a long white rubber hose, et cetera. Was this true, Dad?

So, great things had happened in the presence of this now-departed pain in the ass. It almost made me want to ask for it back.

Apparently, Roberta had had much the same experience. Over dinner that night, she told me she'd been thinking about the television, too, and different memories connected with it.

"Remember switching it on, and, at that moment, Oswald was brought out and shot by Ruby? I remember it so well. The world was in mourning. We all walked around like we were drugged. No one thought something else was going to happen. But right there in front of us on that TV, it was like the first public killing ever televised!"

"We saw it on that one, the Brooker? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I'll be damned."

"My son, Dean, lives way out in the country. He and his wife, Gaby, have got this dachshund named Zip. It's a nice little thing, but the problem is, their next-door neighbor had a rabbit for a pet that Zip was always trying to get. They let this rabbit run loose in their yard, and it drove the dog crazy. Every time he'd see the thing, he'd bark and scratch at the ground or throw himself at the fence separating them. It caused bad feeling between the two families, but what are you going to do?"

"One night, Dean and Gaby were sitting in the kitchen after dinner, drinking coffee. Who comes in covered with dirt from head to toe, carrying the dead rabbit in his mouth and proud as General MacArthur? Zip. The little stinker'd finally figured a way under the fence and killed the poor thing. Well, you can imagine what happened! Gaby had a conniption fit and grabbed it away from the dog while there was still something left. Luckily, Zip hadn't bitten into it. They guessed he'd killed it by shaking it and breaking its neck.

"But what were they going to do now? Both of them could just imagine what the neighbors would say in the morning when Dean and Gaby brought it over and explained what'd happened.

"They talked over all the possible ways out of this, and finally came up with a real long shot. Clever, but a long shot. Gaby took the rabbit and washed it real well. Shampoo and everything. Then she got out her blow-dryer, if you can imagine that. Dried and combed the damned body till it looked brand-new and fluffy. Peter Cottontail-fresh. By this time, it was about ten at night, and part two of the plan.

"Dean took the beautiful dead lump, snuck into the neighbors' backyard, where it'd lived in a hutch up on stilts, and put the body back in its home. Then he tiptoed back, and the two of them went to bed with crossed fingers. What they were hoping was, the neighbors'd see it dead out there, and think it'd died of a heart attack or something in the night. Natural causes. But next morning early, they heard this crazy, wild scream next door, and both of them thought the jig's up. A little while later, the neighbor woman, who by the way was very religious, came banging on their door, looking like she had just seen a horror movie. White as a sheet and talking a million miles an hour, she kept saying, 'A miracle! Honest to God, a miracle! Turns out, yesterday morning their poor little bunny died. So she and her husband dug a deep hole in their backyard and buried him. But when she came out this morning to hang laundry, she found it back in its hutch, clean as a cloud and looking like it hadn't spent the night under a foot of dirt. Mr. Resurrection Rabbit! He was still

dead, of course, but hey, you take your miracles where you can find 'em!" The three of us were sitting on the porch. Beenie had finished the attic and had been coaxed by Roberta into telling the story. I had the feeling she was happy to hang around and chat awhile rather than go home to her empty apartment. We knew about her children, her dead husband, a general description of what life had been like for her till now. From what I'd heard, it wasn't a special life, but a good one. She was proud of her children, had her health, enough money to get by, and a sense of humor that buoyed her and made her the center of attention when she wanted to be.

"Well, I gotta go now, but I'm warning you two: next week I'm tackling the garage and shaping it up. That'll take me all day, so I won't have time for much of the rest of the house. But once it's done, the only thing we'll have to do around here is maintenance."

It was futile to argue that, even more than the basement, we never, ever went into the garage other than to park the car in the winter. Secretly, I rather enjoyed the fact that our small world would be shipshape in a week. Looking at what she'd done in the basement and attic silenced both Roberta's and my protests. The places had been transformed from Grimesvilles to a lot of ordered space and certain interesting objects that, like the television set, evoked enjoyable memories and were thus fun to see again. A red sled we'd hauled the kids around on in both Minnesota and New Mexico, a doll that'd once meant the world to two little girls, and, to my own delight and astonishment, the paperback copies of *Pierre & Redburn* I'd used in graduate school and thought had been lost in a move eons ago. Beenie just kept toting stuff in, looking grim and impatient at the same time. "How about this?" was her usual shorthand question for whether or not we wanted what she held. Although even that was abbreviated toward the end to "this?," Roberta and I sat there waiting to see what would emerge next, what part of our history would return to the surface like a periscope up for a look round. It was hard saying good-bye to some of these things, although there was no earthly reason to keep them. Despite being broken or burned or obsolete, they were our past. Small pieces of a shared life that had worked and grown and found its place in the end.

A few days later, I went to the supermarket to do the shopping. It's a chore I enjoy because the abundance of a market heartens me. I grew up the fourth of five children, and, although we had enough to eat, there was never more than enough. To walk into a store, see all that gorgeous stuff, and know you can buy anything you want or two of anything you want, is a pleasure for me even today. Roberta and I had our lean times, but since we came from similar backgrounds, food was something we never scrimped on. The car could be old and dying the roof full of leaks, but meals at our house were always plentiful, and if the kids wanted to have a friend over for dinner, pull up a chair. Because both of us enjoy cooking, we alternate nights in the kitchen, but the shopping is my job, and I'm glad to do it.

Surprisingly, the argument over what an author really meant in his work had flared again in my Hawthorne class, and the students divided down the middle into those who believed the artist had the final say about his product, and those who felt any interpretation was valid so long as it was appropriate and well supported. I took no sides, but followed the discussion closely after one earnest girl bit off more than she could chew by saying "Look at God, assuming there is one. What did He mean by creating the world? We could say the separate religions are literary critics because each is convinced their interpretation is correct. But are any of them? Isn't God the only one who knows?"

"Yes, but your 'author' is dead, or silent, and won't tell us what He meant. So it's up to us to figure it out, right?" scoffed another.

Smarty-pants theology. Wise guys sneering at the miraculous. I kept quiet, but it irritated me to hear these hermetic twenty-five-year-olds pontificating snidely about something both obvious and important.

Still preoccupied with discussion, I was automatically scanning the shopping

list and taking things off the shelves, when, looking up, I saw Beenie Rushforth twenty feet away. My first impulse was to go up and say hello, but she seemed so content with what she was doing that I held back. She had an open bag of cookies in her hand and was eating one. Nothing special there, except for the look on her face, which was pure bliss. She'd take a bite, close her eyes, and I could almost hear her groan of pleasure. Swallowing, the eyes would open again, look at the cookie as if it were telling her wonderful things, take a bite, et cetera. Either they were the best cookies ever, or she had something else going. Standing there watching, I realized with a shock that I was as bad as my students. I couldn't simply think that here was someone enjoying a moment of their life. No, with all that happiness showing she had to be a little daffy or strange or just plain off. Why are we so suspicious of the good?"

"Hey, Beenie."

She smiled at me, but her expression didn't click recognition for a few beats. "Hey, Scott! How are you?"

"Fine. Those must be great. You look so happy eating them."

"They're good, but I'm not smiling at the cookies. It's remembering something I did as a kid. We were poor, and I was usually hungry the whole day. Even during meals. There were a couple of markets in our town, and I did the shopping for my mother. Every time, I went to a different one, because I had a trick up my sleeve. I'd get everything she asked for, then I'd take a bag of cookies -- it didn't matter what kind, because they all tasted great to me. In every store, there was at least one blind corner where the people who ran it couldn't see you. I knew where each one was. I'd get my cookies, step over there like I was browsing, and verrry carefully open the bag along the seams. You can do that if you watch what you're doing. I was an expert! Now, when it was open, I'd take out two. Only two! And shove those babies into my mouth. Then, chewing really lightly so no one could see, I'd put the bags back on their shelf way in the back so they wouldn't be found soon. I never got caught, and was very proud of it."

"But it's not so much fun, now that you can afford to buy the bag?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Scott. Five weeks ago the doctor told me I'm sick. Since, then, just about everything tastes better than it used to." She said it as fact. Not a trace of "pity me" in her voice.

"Beenie, I'm sorry. Is there anything we can do? Are there treatments--"

"It's too far gone. I was feeling lousy for a long time, and kept telling myself to go have a checkup, but you know how those things are: you're lazy, or down deep you're scared and don't want to know Anyway, you get more scared when you start feeling really bad. So you go when it's impossible to get through a day, and you know pretty much by then it's real trouble --" She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Remember that word 'folly'? You're the English teacher. How come no one uses that word anymore?"

"Anyway, I decided I was going to take their medicine and treatments, but if they get in the way of the time I've got left, then the hell with it --I'm living my days the way I want. And you see this bag of cookies. I ate three of them, and I'm putting the bag back on the shelf, and I ain't paying for it, like the old days. Once a thief, always a thief. But you can never make cookies taste as good as they did."

"Would you like to go for a cup of coffee?"

"No, I've got to go clean a house now. That's one thing I like doing very much. You go into a home, work hard all day getting everything right, then give it back to the owners and let them live in it for another week."

"You're certainly the best we've ever had."

"Thank you, Scott. I'm glad you said that."

Naturally, Roberta was shocked when I told her about the meeting. She asked the same question, sat in the same sad silence I had during the drive home from the market. My father used to call it "touching the razor"-- you hear

that someone you know is dead or dying, and the first impulse is to rear back as though you had touched a razor blade.

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Let her clean the house. She said that's what she likes to do best now."

"Put all her houses in order, huh?"

"I guess you could say that. She spoke so matter-of-factly. 'I'm sick, and it's too late to do anything.' For some odd reason, it reminded me of her dead-rabbit story."

* * *

I was about to enter the classroom, when I heard her voice behind me. "Scott?" I turned, and there was Beenie, an uncertain smile on her face, her hands clasping a small, shiny red purse.

"Beenie! Are you taking classes here?"

"No, I wanted to ask you if it was all right to come to one of yours. I called Roberta just after you left today, and she told me to come right down. I thought, why not? He can only say no."

"Sure you can come. We're doing Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories. Do you know them?"

"No but that's O.K. I want to sit in a class and watch what it does. The subject isn't important."

"Then, madam, please come in."

The students were already in the room, and looked interestedly at her when we entered together. I introduced her as Dr. Rushforth, and said she would be sitting in that day and observing. I had never brought anyone else to the class, so the kids were doubly interested in my colleague.

It was the first time I'd seen her in anything other than jogging clothes. She wore a bench-brown skirt and matching cardigan over a white blouse with a large bow at the neck. Somehow the outfit diminished her. In her sweatsuit, she was a gray package of energy. What she wore today made it look as though she were trying to fit in with a bunch of bores.

As class proceeded, I watched her out of the corner of my eye. She kept a smile on throughout that reminded me of the smile we create when we're spoken to in a language we don't understand, but don't want to offend the speaker. A vaguely tuned-out look. It made me wonder more why she'd come in the first place.

When it was finished, she remained in her seat. I went over. "They like you, don't they? Your students."

"It's good if they do, but sometimes better if they don't. Then they want to compete with me, so they put everything they've got into their work. Why did you come, Beenie?"

"To watch you in action, Scott. To see what you do outside that house. I see you only eating lunch and talking to Roberta. You're a good teacher, and it shows in the way you do it. Nathaniel Hawthorne's not my subject, but you make him interesting. And I learned what a 'pathetic fallacy' is today, too!" She patted my arm and stood up. Halfway up, she stopped for a second and winced. It could only have been from her pain. She smiled at me, seeing I'd caught the look. "My constant houseguest. You'll do, Professor Silver. You'll do. See you day after tomorrow."

Roberta was at an aerobics class, and I was in my study, working on an article. Right in the middle of a superb thought, there was a thump thump on my door.

"Yes?"

"Scott, I got something here. Can you come out and look?"

I liked Beenie and admired her courage, but was it necessary to disturb me in the middle of work to see if we wanted an old tennis racket? I made a face and went to the door. "Yes, Beenie, what is it?"

She held a cardboard box the color of oatmeal. Wrapped around it was a piece

of brown rawhide. Written across the top in large block letters was THE KING OF TOMORROW. I hadn't seen the box in twenty years, but didn't need to open it to know what was inside.

When I was a graduate student, besides my course work, I was required to teach a class in Freshman Composition. It was a pleasant chore, and -- because I was young, idealistic, and full of energy -- I taught it well.

One of the students in there was a serious young woman named Annette Taugwalder. She was smart and talented and wanted more than anything else in the world to be a writer ... Annette cared so much about literature that she often read class assignments twice. I liked her, but was put off by her intensity. I loved books, too, but got the impression she ate them as well as read them. Also, she had an arrogance that said, Nobody is on my level here, folks, so stand back.

Halfway through the semester, she came to me after a class and asked if I would be willing to read the manuscript of her novel. I said yes, but also told her I would be totally honest if I didn't like it. She said she knew that, and it was one of the reasons she was asking me and not another teacher. Unfortunately, it was no good. Yet another twenty-year-old's bildungsroman--there were good parts in it, but generally it was only old stuff trying to sound new. But I spent the better part of a weekend reading it carefully and making notes so Annette would know I had given it a fair shake. On Monday we sat together after class, and, as cannily and diplomati-cally as I could, I told her what I thought was wrong with her book. There were strong things there, but they needed shaping up, better characteriza-tion, clearer perspective. She asked if I thought the manuscript was publishable, and I said no; I thought it had to be rewritten. She became defensive, and said she'd already submitted it to one publisher, who had written a very encouraging letter back. I congratulated her, and said I could very well be wrong. She seesawed back and forth between arrogance and pleas. I could see the discussion was getting nowhere, and, after two hours -- two hours! -- I told her I'd said all I could about the book, and, in the end, it was her decision. Never once was I condescending or dismissive. I am sure of that. To make a terrible story short, Annette walked out of the room and left the manuscript in its box on the table. I thought it a bad dramatic gesture, and best not to follow. I'd wait till our next class and give it back then. I never saw her again. A week later she committed suicide.

Tell me you were connected to a suicide, but feel no guilt, and I will call you a liar. We start whole, but soon guilt begins to carve its insidious tunnels around and through our souls. By the time you are my age, much of the structure should be condemned as unsafe. I have never gotten over this. I don't know what influence our meeting had over her final decision, if any, but what difference does it make? I see myself as one of her accused. I talked to Roberta; I talked to an analyst; I tried talking to God. But nothing helped. "Where did you find that?"

"Up way back on a shelf in the garage. What do you want to do with it?" My first instinct was to say dump it. Instead, I told her to leave it with me. What was more troubling than seeing it again was knowing for sure I had left that box with the police the day I heard about her death. I walked into the police station and spoke to men I'd never had any real contact with, other than seeing them give parking tickets and chatting with store owners. Now two of these blue uniforms were asking me questions, and their faces were solemn, suspicious. One of them took the box and opened it. He looked inside, although I'd already described what was in there. What did he expect to find? I told them what I could, and left. The box looked strangely naked there, open in the middle of that wide oak desk. I left the police station empty-handed.

Beenie gave me this same box and left the room without questions. Adrenaline rushed through my body, and I started breathing shallowly, quickly. Whatever I'd been doing before fell from my thoughts. I took Annette's novel back into my office and spent the rest of the day reading it.

Roberta was still gone at four when Beenie came in to say good-bye. "Well, I'm done. That garage is smiling again. Hey Scott, are you all right? You look gray as cement. I think you should put down those papers and go out for a walk."

I was two-thirds of the way through. It was still a bad book, worse than I remembered. "Do you know what this is, Beenie? Do you have a minute to listen?"

She said sure, and I invited her in. I went to the desk, and she sat in my fat reading chair by the window. For such a terrible experience, it took only a short time to tell. I'd spent years going over it in my mind, but here I was, telling it again, and it took no more than ten minutes. When I was finished, she looked at her hands.

"When I was young my husband and I liked to spend New Year's Eve in interesting places. Once, it was in a train going across Canada; another time in a firehouse in Moscow, Idaho. Then the children came --" She threw a hand in the air as though she were throwing confetti to the wind. "Kids tame you, don't they? After Dean was born, we usually stayed home on New Year's, and maybe brought in a bottle of champagne. Once in a while, there was a party, but we weren't so crazy about going out and wearing funny hats."

I looked at her, confused by her connection between funny hats and my story. We sat there, silently thinking about death and December 31st.

"I never could figure out what I liked better -- New Year's on the back of a camel, or sitting in the living room with our kids, waving sparklers and jumping around. Both were good."

"What does that have to do with you? Who knew more, Scott -- you before this girl died, or the you after? Scars make our faces ugly, but they also give it character. From my point of view, I'd've done the same thing you did back then -- That girl didn't want your opinion; she wanted you to say she was great. Well, she wasn't, and, sooner or later, that would've caught up with her."

"Maybe if it had caught up with her later, she would have been better equipped--"

"Nonsense. She's dead, Scott. Weak links snap. But as for you, here's something I believe in really strongly: guilt's a whore. It goes with anybody, but it's not good in bed. You're not dying, but this thing you've got with the girl is no different than my situation. We could both use up whole days feeling guilty 'bout what we didn't do in life, but why spend a day in bed with someone who doesn't give you any pleasure?"

"That's too easy, Beenie."

"No it's not! It's the hardest thing in the world. Just dumping your guilt and moving on."

"Like I gotta be right now. Sorry we don't see eye-to-eye on this. You know, I do believe in recycling. Save your old papers, Coke cans, glass. But not old guilt. Far as I'm concerned, guilt goes bad after a certain while, and can't be used after that."

We said our good-byes, and she left. It was so disappointing. I knew Beenie wasn't Albert Einstein, but it seemed a person who knew they were going to die soon would also know ... more. But what she'd said sounded as though it had come from one of those popular psychology books you find at a drugstore. Sighing, I put my glasses back on and picked up the last pages of Annette Taugwalder.

New Year's came and went, and I thought of Beenie's evenings with her family. Would she visit with Dean and his wife? Or with the daughter? Why did she talk so much about the son, but almost nothing about the daughter? Roberta knew.

"Because they don't get along. The girl married a stinker who caused bad blood between them. It breaks Beenie's heart."

"There's been no reconciliation since she got sick?"

"No."

I could not throw the manuscript away, but my smart wife came up with a

solution, as usual. Following her suggestion, I went to the university hall of records, found Annette's old address, and sent the manuscript there with a note on the package to forward it if necessary. I assumed her parents had a copy of her book, but what a remarkable surprise if they didn't!

At two o'clock in the morning, I woke Roberta to read her this passage from Rousseau:

"She only kept her bed for the last two days, and continued to converse quietly with everyone to the last. Finally when she could no longer talk and was already in her death agony, she broke wind loudly. "Good!" She said, turning over, "a woman who can fart is not dead." Those were the last words she spoke.'

"Now, Beenie Rushforth or not? Can't you imagine her going out like that? Farting and stomping and shaking her broom at the gods."

Roberta reached for her glasses on the night table, which was her prelude to saying something that mattered. She would chat with glasses off, but when it was serious, she somehow felt she needed a clear field of vision.

"I think you've got her pegged wrong, Scott. She's tough in ways, but also very vulnerable. Extremely vulnerable. Just listening to her talk about her daughter is so damned sad! The woman grieves. I think their separation hurts her more than the cancer. You know, I look at her, and we talk, and every time I think, 'Scott and I are so lucky. We are so, so lucky.'"

I was shoveling snow off the front sidewalk, when the Rushforth Toyota pulled to the curb in front of me. She got out wearing the giant green government-issue parka her son had given her after he left the army.

"Scott, you and I gotta talk."

"What's up, Beenie?"

"That book. You shouldn't've sent it back to the parents."

"How did you know about that? Did Roberta tell you?"

"No, but I knew. From now on, things like that, you either throw away or you keep 'em. Never pass 'em on. They're your memories, not theirs."

"What're you talking about?"

"I did the same thing and it got me into big trouble. You can do what you want, but I'm just telling you now so you know: there can be problems. Keep it or throw it away. That's the only rule to follow." She touched my arm, then walked back to her car and got out a bottle of cleaner. "It's tricky because everything seems loose and open. It's not! See you later."

I watched her walk to the house. What was tricky? How had she known about what I'd done with the manuscript? Keep it or throw it away? Had she gone mad?

I stabbed the snow shovel into the nearest mound and marched to the kitchen door, preparing for a talk either about Beenie with Roberta, or a talk with Beenie about what the hell was going on. Looking through the window, I saw both women sitting at the table. Beenie was looking straight ahead and crying. She'd say something stop, shake her head or drop it in defeat. I continued to watch, not knowing what to do. Finally Roberta happened to look my way. I pointed to me, then to the door. Can I come in? Her eyes widened, and she mouthed a big No! I went back to shoveling.

When I'd finished the sidewalk and the never-ending path to the front door, I wondered if it was safe to go back inside yet. There was so much happening, and it all had to do with the cleaning woman.

"Scott?"

"Yes? I'm freezing! Can I enter my own house now? Or are we wrestling another crisis to the ground?"

"Come in."

Despite my displeasure, my antennae went up, and the signals sent were not good. Roberta's arms were crossed. A bad sign. Her face was expressionless. Bad sign two. My wife is an optimistic, good-natured person. If she gets mad once every two months, it's surprising -- and most of the time, that anger is totally justified.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"The matter is, you are going to take me out to lunch and explain these." Our family had spent four years in Hale, Texas. A few of the only good times I remember there were sitting in the Lone Star Bar, drinking beer with Glenda Revelle, who might have been the most beautiful student I have ever known. If they're honest, all teachers will admit that, at least once in their careers, a young person walked into the class who had the potential to turn both the teacher and their world inside out. Some get involved; most don't. The problem for those who don't is, this ravishing student continues to sit in front of us half a year, their physical presence alone a daily reminder of the erotic dare: how intriguing it would be to live in a land way far from the mind. A land where the senses are every-thing, humiliation is likely, and outside the door of the room is probably nothing. Glenda and I did not have an affair, although she made it plain that would have been fine. We came close twice, and I was tempted. Close enough to smell her breath and the heat off the skin of her shoulder. But it did not happen.

She was persistent, and sent me a number of letters. Silver calligraphic letters on black paper. Stupidly, I kept two -- and Roberta found them. That led to the evening across the kitchen table when she called me a mean loser. Eventually she believed I had not been with the girl, and we reached a thin truce. The best one can hope for in situations like that.

Now Roberta stood in front of the fireplace, holding out two black envelopes as if they were diseased.

"Ro --"

"Why did you save these, Scott?"

"I didn't. You saw what I did with those letters. Where did you get those?"

"Beenie found them."

"Oh, Beenie, huh? Well, where is she? I want to ask her a few questions."

"She left for the day. She's too upset to work. But that doesn't explain these. Why did you lie to me? Have you been writing her?"

I walked over, took the letters out of her hand, and threw them in the fire.

"I haven't done anything! I threw those letters away just like that, a long time ago, and you watched me do it! I have been a good man since then, Roberta. I've worked very hard to make amends to you and the children for treating you all badly, and I think I've done O.K. If you don't trust me any more than to think for twenty years I kept some half-assed love letters from a student hidden in the back of a drawer to moon over Where is Beenie? I want to talk to her."

"She left. I told you she left. Why did you keep those letters?"

"I DIDN'T!"

"Then why did she find them?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

-- Do, too!"

"DO NOT! YOU SAW ME THROW THEM IN THE FIREPLACE IN HALE!"

"Obviously not all of them?"

"For Christ's sake, Roberta, I'm telling you the truth!"

"Then why'd she find these?"

"I don't know! How did she know I had sent the manuscript to Annette's family? How did she find it in the first place? I left it with the police. THAT'S WHY I WANT TO TALK TO HER!" Fuming, I gave her my back and walked to the door.

"Where are you going? Come back here and start telling the truth!" I turned again and faced her. "What is holy to you, wife?"

"The grandchildren."

"Then I swear to you on all of their heads that you saw me burn each and every one of Glenda Revelle's letters back in Hale. O.K? Is there anything else I can say? Shall I slice my throat for further proof? Do I deserve no trust?" That was a terrible moment, because we looked at each other across a room that was suddenly miles wide. There was such silence between us. It told me no; in her mind, I still deserved no trust. That was so shocking after all those years. I would have gone to my grave thinking I had been bad once, but slowly,

slowly, I had gotten all right again in my wife's heart. Wrong. Like one of those ghastly accidents in nuclear power plants, my almost with Glenda Revelle had spoiled the earth around us for a thousand years.

"Scott!"

"What?! I'm going to find Beenie. I'm going to talk to her and find out what the hell she's doing. Then I'm going to come back here and dig out what other poisons you've got inside you."

I don't like driving in the snow, because I never feel like I have full control over the car on icy roads. But you can bet your behind I drove that day. I drove too fast, and a couple of times fishtailed going around turns. Beenie had never gone home early, much less ten minutes after arriving but her unhappiness today didn't concern me. I would leave her alone as soon as she told me about the dead girl's manuscript, and where she'd found letters I'd burned years ago.

Strange as it sounds, it didn't cross my mind that these circumstances were bizarre and verging on the impossible. I knew I'd given Annette's book to the cops and had thrown the black letters into the fire. Despite that, here they all were again, back on earth to accuse and alarm. Yet I wasn't spooked; I was irate! Who was this woman to dredge my past and come up with the only things I wanted to stay buried a fathom deep? I wasn't a bad man, damn it, but these two memories said I was. Insensitive and selfish, a pedantic lecher who cared little for most people and too much in the wrongest way for others.

We have friends who live on Plum Hill. Houses there are old and big, and most have long sweeps of lawn right down to the lake. Groucho Marx had spent a summer there, and was purported to have said it would have been a nice place if it hadn't been so beautiful. Whenever there, I always marveled over the way the buildings, like powerful eider statesmen, sat up on that hill and knew they were impressive even if you had no idea whom they belonged to. Now and then, Roberta and I talked about what it'd be like to live on Plum Hill, but in our hearts, we knew it wasn't for us. What would we do next door to Peter Dawson, who owned the biggest newspaper in the state? Or Dexter Lewis, the junk-bond king? These were people you saw in town on Saturday wearing freshly ironed khaki pants and denim shirts, getting a haircut or buying a hammer at the hardware store. You nodded at each other and perhaps said a few pleasant, shoot-the-breeze words while waiting on line for the cashier to get on with it. But outside, the "Plums" drove off in their new Mercedes, while you dug in your pocket for the keys to a Chevy that hadn't been washed in some weeks. The world of difference doesn't rip you apart, but, once in a while, you stand by the door of your car a little too long and give a small sigh.

I stopped at a gas station and used the book in their phone booth to find her address. "B. Rushforth -- Plum Hill 67a." I assumed the small a meant the difference between her gatehouse and the main. The sky had started the morning blue, but had slipped down gray-white to almost brown by the time I entered the Plum Hill gates and started looking for numbers. A large black labrador retriever ran out of a driveway and followed the car, barking awhile until he lost interest a few houses down and wagged his tail back home. 63, 65, 67. The name on the mailbox was none other than Samuel Morgan, sole owner of the Morgan Computer Company. You know the one I'm talking about -- each machine costs millions and is the darling of the U.S. Defense Department? I think the man is still in his thirties, but is reputed to be astronomically wealthy. Beenie rented her house from this guy?

The driveway wound up and around a long way before you actually saw anything. The "gatehouse" came first, although it guarded no gate. No car was parked near her house, and, from what I could see, none were at the big house, either. I felt like a thief casing the joint. I am not a thief or a snoop, but I decided to snoop. I would do it in plain sight, however, so if anyone happened to come up, they'd see me at it. But I did have every intention of looking in whatever windows were there and finding what-ever clues were available.

Snow had begun to fall, but it was light and playful. The whole feeling of

what I was about to do lightened my mood. It was so out of character for me -- so nosy and so none of my business to peek in a stranger's windows. I couldn't help smiling, although I was still pretty riled.

Flakes began to stick and melt on my glasses. I had to take them off for a wipe before spying in earnest. Specs in hand, I looked around and realized what an utterly beautiful scene it was. Acres of lawn, dark trees on the edges, the green-brown stillness of the lake behind the fat floating snowflakes

Beenie's house was nothing special. A small Cape Cod saltbox the color of silvery tree bark -- from the outside, it appeared cozy and a good place for one person to live, two at most. Pink gauzy curtains framed the windows. From afar, I looked through and saw a couch covered in a large flower print. Eyeglasses back in place, I went to the window that looked into her living room. Typical stuff: appropriate furniture, a few throw rugs, dull pictures on the walls. For no reason, I looked at my watch and then chuckled. I'd seen too much TV. Without realizing it, I was spying the way they did it on television -- check your watch a lot; check over your shoulder constantly; don't spend too much time looking in a window before moving on to the next. Check that watch again -- you have only so much time. I had no idea how much I would have before someone noticed me peeking in windows, and came over or called the cops, and I would get myself into big trouble.

Moving slowly around the house, I passed a kitchen with the remnants of breakfast left out -- a knife on a plate filled with bread crumbs, a coffee cup tipped over on its saucer. Something touched my mind, but didn't come into focus until a few minutes later. A small window into a bathroom. Standing on tiptoe, I could make out a yellow shower curtain and a rumpled towel tossed across the sink.

I was a step toward the next window, when it registered. "It's messy!" Her whole house was messy. Beenie Rushforth, Queen Terminator of the dust speck, Grand Wielder of Mop and Broom/Look-Out-Dirt-Here-I Come, lived in a house with wet towels and strawberry-jam smudges on her tablecloth? It was not only hard to believe, it was nigh onto impossible. I know -- People are a giant admixture of contradictions, and nothing should be surprising in life, but if you had seen the results of this woman's work, you would fully understand why it was inconceivable for her to live like this.

Still dumbfounded, I walked to the last window and saw dead Annette Taugwalder sitting on Beenie Rushforth's bed, reading a magazine.

It was a trick, a joke; I was drunk; I was insane. She was dead. She could not be there. But oh, she most certainly was. Twenty years' dead Annette flipping the pages of a magazine. Without realizing it, I put my head on the glass, because the world was suddenly a new place for me.

"Annette?" I put a hand on the glass, too. It was cold. I felt that. She looked up and smiled. I was fifty-five years old and thought Forget what I thought. I was wrong.

She stood up and walked out of the room. I kept my forehead on the glass, and kept looking at the tangled bedspread where she'd sat. I had never in my life been so close to the answer, but I was petrified. Everything inside me howled and screeched and shook the bars of their cages. Let us out. Let us run away. The fire's close and will kill us. "Professor Silver?"

I turned, and there was Annette. "I'm scared of you." She nodded, said she understood.

"I don't know what to do. Can one talk to Death?"

"Yes, Professor. We have to talk."

"Is it because of Beenie?"

She nodded again, then gestured for me to follow. We walked a long way across the lawn and down to a boathouse beside the lake. There was a pinewood bench in front of it, and we sat down.

"She thought it was best if I came first, because you and I have the most to talk about. The other things aren't as serious."

"Sometimes I dream of talking to the dead. Sometimes the dreams are very

vivid."

She frowned. "This isn't a dream. I'm really here, and we have to talk, so please don't pinch yourself or jump up and down trying to wake up. It's real; I'm real. I am dead, but I'm here now."

"Why?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Because I hate you, and you must know that. It was your fault back then. Or a lot of it was. You were the straw that broke my back. You said my book was bad, and bingo, that did it."

"Oh Anette, I didn't --"

"Yes, you did! I wasn't dumb, you know. I knew what you were saying."

"Should I have lied? You said you wanted the truth."

"I did, but not one that would kill me. Your truth was like stabbing a knife into my fucking brain!"

"I was so sure it was good. So sure you'd say, 'Annette, it's stunning! It's like nothing else.'" She slid closer down the bench, pointing furiously at me.

"Do you remember what you did say? Huh? I do. You said, 'I think in certain places you've sat a little too close to the fires of your favorite writers. Sometimes you use their heat to keep your prose warm.'" You pompous, smug asshole! It was my fire! I lit all the fires in that book --"

"Annette, that's enough."

Beenie's firm voice came from behind me, but before I turned, I saw the girl's fury sink back into her face like a fist she had to hide. She still hated me, but was more afraid of what would happen if she didn't do what she'd been told.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Hiya, Scott. I wasn't expecting you so soon. Go in the house, Annette. You can talk more to him later."

Like the hyperbolic young woman she was, or had been, she got up without deigning to look at me, tsk'd loudly, and stomped off. I looked at her shoes, and realized they were the same high riding boots she'd worn and had been so in fashion when I had known her. "I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack, Beenie."

"Don't worry -- your heart's as strong as a horse's. What you should watch out for is that uric acid. Stay away from tomatoes, is my advice."

I took a deep breath and looked at her. "Who are you?"

"God."

"Oh."

She smiled and took my hand. "Uh-Oh City!"

* * *

Had it gotten colder, or had my soul's temperature dropped ten degrees since sitting on the bench? Beenie had a large stick in her hand and was snapping off little bits. That was the only sound around us except for the occasional faraway car driving into the Plum Hill turnoff. "Don't you want to ask any questions?"

I was trying to get calm. My eyes were closed. She nudged me and handed over a piece of stick. I looked. A perfectly carved head of me about three inches high. Perfect coloring, too -- my gray hair, blue eyes. I dropped it and unconsciously wiped my hands on my pants.

"Come on, boy; lighten up! It's funny. Ask me some questions, and let's get going on this."

It was my turn for narrowed eyes. "How can you be God and have cancer?"

"Good shot, Professor. Now we're cooking! I guess I should begin from the beginning, huh? She was about to go on, when she saw something behind me and stopped. Standing up, she cupped both hands around her mouth and shouted, "You go back to the house, Annette! I'm not fooling, and I'm not telling you again!"

I didn't turn, because I had no desire whatsoever to see A. Taugwalder again anytime soon.

"That damned girl. I told her, you know? I told her she could have her say,

but then she had to back off so I could explain things to you. But she's headstrong and so used to getting her way. Are you all right, Scott?"

"No."

"Too bad. Where was I? At the beginning O.K. I was born in McPherson, Kansas. My father owned a hardware store, and our whole family worked there. One day, when I was behind the counter, a man I'd never seen before came in and asked for a pair of pliers. We got to talking and he told me his name was Gilbert, Nolan Gilbert. I was fifteen years old. Do you know anything about the mystic Jewish?"

"You mean Jewish mystics?"

"Right, that's them."

"Well, something. I've read --"

"They came closest. Ever heard of the Lamed Wufniks?'"

"Beenie, what are you talking about?"

"These mystics believed in Lamed Wufniks. Thirty-six righteous men whose job is to justify the world to God. Or, looking at it another way, they're supposed to explain to God why man has a right to be here. Now, if one of these thirty-six ever discovered who he was, he immediately died, and somebody else, in another part of the world, took his place. Because, you see, even though they don't know it, they're the secret pillars of the universe. Saviors. Without them doing this justifying God would get rid of the whole bunch of mankind."

"Wup --"

"Wuf. Lamed Wufniks. Which is not so far from wrong. The big difference is, we don't do any justifying, because we are God."

"You're a 'Wufnik'?"

"No, I'm God. Or one-thirty-sixth of Him. They got the number right."

A bird flew in over the water and out again. I looked at Beenie, the ground, Beenie, the ground. What was I supposed to say?

"You don't believe me. And what about Annette? You need more miracles? I can give them if it'll help, but I thought she'd be enough. You're a tough audience, Professor Silver. Here." With her left hand, she pulled a silver dollar from behind my neck. With her right, she held something up. In her palm was one of those plastic, dome-shaped doodads you shake up, and fake snow flutters and falls over a scene like Paris or the North Pole. Only, in this one, real life tiny people were sitting on a bench, moving --and after staring I realized it was us in there, doing what we out here were doing move for move. "For God's sake, stop it!"

"O.K." She closed her hand around the snowy dome, and it disappeared. I half-stood. "What do you want from me? Why are you doing this?" She pulled me down again. "Just sit back and listen to the rest of my story. I was fifteen when I met Nolan Gilbert. He was about seventy. First he told me, then showed me, who he was, like I'm doing with you. Then he said he was dying and I was supposed to replace him."

"That's how it works, see. You live your life normally, even after you know. But like everybody else -- and you are like everybody else, Scott; you got to know that. Sooner or later, our time to die comes, too. A normal lifetime -- sixty or seventy years, usually. But the difference is, when our time comes, we have to find a replacement. Some are luckier than others -- they know who it is that they want years before they die. Like me with you."

"You knew me before?"

"Sure. I've been cleaning your room at the university for years, but you never really saw me, because I worked night shift. Sometimes we'd pass each other in the hall if you worked late."

"You're telling me God is man?"

"No, no, no! I am not saying that at all. Man has God in him, but he's not God! No, the absolute simplest way to put it is this: man is man, but there are thirty-six chosen men who, together, are God. That's why normal people feel close to Him -- because He's them in many ways. Nolan told me about the Greeks. You know about that. They believed there were lots of gods, which is

kind of right, and that they all had human feelings. They were interested in sex, got angry, and did unfair things, stuff like that. So the Greeks were close, too, in guessing right, but they also thought gods lived up on special mountains away from the rest of the world. Wrong. We're here -- just all over the place, and not looking like people'd expect, you know? I'm one, and I'm sure not impressive, huh.? But I'm only a thirty-sixth of the big puzzle. Fit me together with the other parts, and you've got ONE IMPRESSIVE GOD, all right!

I'll tell you something else, too -- the world is full of puzzle pieces. Know how you feel lonely and apart sometimes? That's because you're not connected up the right way. People who find out that secret spend the rest of their lives trying to find their matching other parts. But I'm not here to talk about that with you. We don't have time for it. There's so much else I gotta tell you."

AS I mentioned earlier, before that wondrous afternoon with Beenie Rushforth, I was beginning to believe more and more in God, but one along the lines of Emily Dickinson's 'God is a distant, stately lover.' One who is fully aware of us and what we are up to every minute of our lives,' but one who has the love and respect to allow us our own fates. When we die and reach whatever other side there is, He will go over our lives with us page by page, like an essay written for school, an essay having on it many mistakes that must be identified and corrected before the essay is put away. Once the mistakes have been brought to our attention, we will recognize most of them, and He will point out others. By the time we get up from His desk we'll fully understand what we did wrong. Did I believe in reincarnation? No. Why would we repeat third grade if we fully perceived all of the mistakes we'd made there? I believed in an afterlife, but not on earth. I hadn't a clue as to where we went, and I did not want to guess.

However, when I arrived at my own front door again many hours later, my understanding of the world, of life, of death, of God ... was a quintillion miles away from what I had thought before. For this loud, sweet, dying woman had proven without question that what she had told me was true. As she said, I was a hard case and wanted proof even beyond Annette. Proof that transcended the transcendent. I cannot tell you what she did, but I can say she took me where I wanted to go, and showed me the impossible.

I wanted to see Melville and Hawthorne alive and in the flesh, wanted to hear their voices and the kind of words they used outside their books. I wanted to see Albert Pinkham Ryder at Christmastime, brewing up his own private brand of perfume and giving it away in little jars to children. I wanted to visit Montaigne in his tower, circa 1592, and look over his shoulder while he wrote, "Though we may mount on stilts, we must still walk on our own legs, and on the highest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own bottom." These were my heroes, the people I'd thought about my entire adult life. If Beenie was God, and time belongs to God, then she could clap once and give me these people for a moment. She did. She took me wherever I wanted to go, and affably said stay as long as you like. Funny thing was, I didn't need or want to stay long. Only a few minutes to breathe their air, see how they held their pen or formed words with their lips. That was all I needed, and she gave it to me.

After that, when I was sure, I asked questions, but her answers were often unsatisfying.

"Why me?"

"Scott, I'd tell you if I knew. But I don't, honest. It just happens. They tell you that -- one day you'll see your replacement, and you'll know. I guess it's sort of like love at first sight."

"Beenie, you're God/God knows everything. There's nothing He doesn't know."

"Maybe when we're all joined together, all thirty-six of us. But that never happens, so individually we got to struggle along with what we do know. You're it, mister. You're the one who's gonna take my place."

"Where do we go when we die?"

"Wherever you want. Some people stick around here; others take off."

"Take off where?"

"I told you: wherever they want."

"You're not helping!"

"They're vague questions. Remember in your class? 'Be more specific, Silver!' By the way, you know where you got that name? Your family's real name is 'Flink,' but when your great-grandfather came here from Saarland, he didn't think it sounded American, so he changed it to 'Silver.' Jack Silver instead of Udo Flink."

"Udo Flink? That's the stupidist name I ever heard."

"I guess your grandpa thought so, too. Do you want egg salad or corned beef?" From her left and right pockets, she took out sandwiches wrapped in plastic.

"Roberta told me you liked my egg salad."

"I do. Thank you. That would be nice." She handed it to me, and I held it up.

"An egg-salad sandwich from God."

"At least that way you can be sure it's fresh, eh?"

"Beenie, what am I supposed to do now? It's an incredible compliment that you've chosen me, hut... what do you do when you're "

"Well, you're not there yet, bug, so don't start worrying about that. First you gotta pass the tests. I mean, you're already over the first hurdle, which is getting picked. But now come the tests. Those're the rules, and you've just gotta follow them."

"What kind of tests? What kind of rules?"

"You want to know now? Don't you want to finish your sandwich first?"

"Now."

"O.K." She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin that had 'Dairy Queen' printed across it. "First thing you gotta do -- the first test, if you want to call it that -- is work out your problem with Annette. A dead person can't be angry. There's a lot they've got to do on the other side, but so long as they're still mad at something in life, it keeps them sidetracked. Know what I mean?"

"Why can't you do something to take her anger away?"

"First of all, I wouldn't know how; remember, I'm only a fraction of the whole, and my powers aren't as great as you think. Second, you two've got to work it out yourselves. If I waved some kind of magic wand over her and did what you said, it wouldn't solve her problems. It'd only be like a stopgap. A kid's got to learn to tie its own shoes sooner or later."

"What should I do to help her?"

"That's part of your test. You have to figure her out and how to start patching things up. I can tell you, though, she's not going to be much help. You've got yourself a hostile witness there, counselor. She hates your guts." I gathered. Does she know about me? Obviously she knows about you, since you were the one who brought her back."

"Yeah, she knows about me, but not about you. She thinks I brought her here so you could make peace. She doesn't know it's part of your test."

"How do you hush the dead?"

She slapped my shoulder. "That's a good question. You know what one of my tests was?"

"Beenie, these are the ultimate mysteries! They're not recondite -- they're impossible to understand. How am I supposed to go about --"

"What does 'recondite' mean?"

"Difficult to understand."

"Stop whining man. Of course they're hard to understand! You're the scholar, the thinker. I'm just a stupid little woman from Kansas with kids who don't like me. But I passed my tests. Sure, they were different from yours, but they weren't any easier."

"How can God have trouble with His children?"

"Hey, friend, did you ever read the Bible? A lot of His kids gave him lip. From what I heard, Moses sat up on the mountain and argued forty days! Christ?"

'Why have You forsaken me?' Some gratitude, huh? And Job! He wanted personal proof! He wanted us to drop everything, come down and show him, like we were demonstrating a vacuum cleaner!

"I thought you said all thirty-six of you never got together."

"Not anymore. In the old days, but not now. It hasn't been necessary until now. Don't you see, Scott? That's why man keeps wanting to be immortal. Not so he can live a million years, but because, deep in his blood, he knows God must be kept alive for every generation. God, who's a part of every man because He's made up of men. Thirty-six of them. From all cultures, all kinds of personalities and professions, men, women, kids. ... The faces of God are always changing, because the separate pieces change. But at the end, there's just Him, and He's immortal so long as man wants to be. The fact that I have trouble with my daughter, or that I'm dying of cancer, doesn't matter. It's important to me, sure, but not to the big picture. Those're some of my tests -- making peace with my children, and learning how to die. Christ had to learn how to die, too."

I made fists and shook them at the sky. "It's too earthly! It's supposed to be more majestic!"

Beenie said nothing while I raged, and after, when my futile hands opened and dropped slowly to my lap.

"Finish your lunch, Scott. I recondite it very highly."

The snow had started again as we approached her house. I would much rather have stayed outside and watched it fall than go in and talk to Annette.

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Play it by ear. See how she acts."

Beenie opened the front door and waved me in. It smelled nice inside. An aroma of woodsmoke and soap. Brushing the top of her head vigorously to get the snow off, she called, "Annette?" No answer.

"Annette, come on out here, will you?"

When nothing happened, she scratched her nose and went looking. No Annette.

"Nowhere! That little skunk. Where'd she go?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to see me." I hoped my relief wasn't too obvious.

"I guess not. Well, that isn't your problem. I'll find her and get you two together. You want a hot toddy or something! Another sandwich?"

"No, thank you. I need to go and sit alone awhile. There's too much to think about."

"I'll say!" She opened the door and walked me out to the car. "Say, what's that inside there? Is it Annette?"

"I don't know."

There was something propped in the passenger's seat. At first, I, too, thought it was the girl, because it was so large. Getting closer, I could almost -- "Nisco?! Great God in Heaven, it is! It's Nisco."

"What?" Beenie came up next to me and bent over to look through the windshield. "What's Nisco? It's a stuffed animal. Look how big it is! Must have cost you a fortune. Did you buy it for one of your grandchildren? Hey, what's the matter?"

"It's the Nisco! I can't believe it I haven't thought of that -- I couldn't finish the sentence. My jaw worked up and down a couple of times, but didn't have the oomph to do anything else. "Hey, what's up? What is that thing?" I turned to Beenie and looked at her with, I'm sure, very stunned eyes. "It's the Nisco."

"You keep saying that. Looks like a stuffed animal to me."

"It is. When I was a boy, the only bad dreams I ever had were of that wolf. See the X's where the eyes should be. I once went to the movies and saw a cartoon with him in it. He was the bad guy. The tilted hat, big mouth, fangs. He was chasing the Three Little Pigs. That night and for months afterward, I dreamed he was chasing me. Holding a knife and fork and always drooling, he was going to carve me up. I was so scared. I used to wake up screaming. My

parents'd run in, thinking someone was murdering me--"

"Why'd you call him Nisco."

"I don't know. He was always that: Not Big Bad Wolf, just Nisco. The only thing that really frightened me when I was young."

"Annette put it there, didn't she? No one else in the world knew about him."

"Yes, she probably did. That's why she's not around. Left her calling card, but I don't know what she's trying to tell you. What're you going to do with it?"

I thought of that petrified little boy jerking awake in the middle of many nights, heart banging, panting -- escaping, but only just. The sound of him behind me running, running so fast, rubbing his knife and fork together, ssslick-ssslick-ssslick, inches away, screaming, "I'm going to EAT you!" Laughing that terrifying, stupid cartoon laugh. No Devil from Hell can scare us more than childhood demons, cartoon wolves or not. Our soft spots are so much larger then. We have no armor.

"Huh! You want to keep it?"

"No! Can I throw it out here?"

"It's not necessary." She put her hand on the windshield over the passenger's side. The Nisco faded and slowly began to disappear. Then, at the last moment, when it was mostly shimmer and dark blur, there was a loud BLAP., and the inside of the windshield splattered with blood.

* * *

I didn't hear from either of them for three days. I tried to go about my life in as normal a fashion as possible, but that was absurd. God and Death and Sanity had all walked into my house and sat down at the table. They wanted to talk; they had plans for me. Was I supposed to pretend it wasn't them, and listen as if theirs were only another business proposition!

How would I handle Annette? What other tests would I have to face if I were able to resolve the conflict with her? What happened to you after you 'passed'? Did angels come down and take you on a tour of the heavens? Were there angels? I had to remember to ask Beenie: Do Angels exist?

Can you imagine having someone in your life who could answer that question conclusively?

I remained nervous and alert. I taught well, really singing out the questions and answers in my classes, keeping the students up on their toes. One girl stopped me in the hall and asked why I was in such a good mood. I laughed like a hyena. Good mood? Oh my dear, if only you knew.

Norah called one night to say she had broken up with the cartoonist and was going out with an airline pilot now. My daughter's fickleness and vague promiscuity had been a real thorn in my side for years, and we'd had more than one squabble about it and about her whole life-style. But this time, we talked seriously and illuminatingly about why she'd decided to make the change. At the end of the conversation, there was a comfortable silence, then she said, 'Thank you, Dad.'

"For what?"

"Taking me seriously."

"Darling I've taken you seriously since you were a girl."

"No, you've often treated me like I was a student you thought was going to be great, but ended up disappointing you."

"Norah!"

"It's true, Dad, but listen to me. Hear what I'm saying. This conversation was special; it was really different. It's the first time in I-can't-remember-when that I felt you were listening and were actually interested. You don't have to approve of me, Dad. I'm not asking for that anymore. I want only for you to love me and hear about my life."

When we'd hung up, I went to find Roberta, who had been listening in on another extension. "Was what she said true? Have I been such a lousy father all these years?"

"Not lousy, Scott, but tough and often removed. You were very hard on the girls for years. We've talked about this before: Gerald was born when Norah

was twelve, remember. I'm sure that's what she was referring to." Our three children -- Norah, Freya, and Gerald. Norah illustrates medical textbooks and lives in Los Angeles. Freya is married with two children and lives in Chicago. Gerald is severely retarded and is institution-alized. We tried for years to keep him home with us, but if you know about care for the severely retarded, you know it is virtually impossible to live any kind of normal life around someone with this handicap. They are black holes of need for help and love. No matter what you give them, it is never enough or correct. You can ask for nothing in return, because they have nothing. Sure, you pray for them to show some sign of recognition or normal behavior. Just once. Just a flash of what in your greatest hopes might happen some magical day: they smile when you kiss them rather than scream as if they've been wounded. Or pick up a spoon and dip it in the soup instead of hitting themselves in the face with it or gouging at their eyes. Unknowingly, they take everything you have. When you are exhausted and resentful, guilt taps you on the shoulder and knocks you down another way. It is a terrible lesson and burden. I would not wish it on my worst enemy.

When Gerald was seven, Freya walked out of the kitchen one morning to answer the telephone, and her brother put his hand down on a lit kitchen burner. At the hospital, even Roberta, who had fought hardest to keep him home, agreed we could no longer care for him properly. After he recovered, we found a perfect school, and he has lived there since. He is both our sword of Damocles and our permanent reminder of how wonderful life can be if you are lucky.

"We all adjusted to him differently, Scott. I tried too hard to see him normal and gave him too much of the love I should have given the girls. You did what you could, but it was a terrible disappointment, and it ate you up. When it got too much, you retreated from all of us into your work. It makes sense. It's both of our personalities perfectly. I wanted everyone to be happy; you wanted everyone to be exceptional. Neither of us had a chance of succeeding so we both made big mistakes. But you know, we couldn't have been so bad, because the girls still love us. It's clear in whatever they do."

Yes, we'd had this discussion before, but having it again right after Norah's comment hit me a K.O. punch to the heart. Had I really been so bad and negligent? Worse, had I known that all along, but spent years hiding it from myself? I knew life was a progressively more sophisticated game of hide-and-seek with ourselves, but could we really be unaware of something this momentous?

Further, if it were true, why would I rate to replace Beenie Rushforth as one of the thirty-six? A man who treated his family with such arrogance and disrespect? In her inimitable way, she'd told me that 'it took all kinds,' but could such an appalling egoist be one of them?

So much at once. My life jumped, bounced, and floated like one of those astronauts walking in space. It had suddenly become almost weightless, because its own personal gravity had ceased to be. I tried repeatedly to call Beenie, but there was never an answer. Finally I realized she wanted me to think things over, and would answer my questions only when she came again to clean our house. How ridiculous yet correct that profession was for her. The ultimate cleaner. The ultimate bringer of order.

Needless to say, I galloped back and forth over the emotional gamut, waiting for her next visit. I canceled my class for that day, and bribed Roberta out of the house with a gift of lunch and an afternoon movie with her best friend. Ten minutes after she left, the empty and quiet house made me so nervous that I got out the vacuum cleaner and did the floor in the kitchen before the bell rang.

I opened the door, and there was Annette Tangwalder.

"Beenie couldn't come, so she sent me. I'm supposed to clean your house." She brushed by me into the hall, throwing this last line over her shoulder. "Wow, I never thought I would be in this house. Vacuum cleaner's all ready for me, eh? O.K."

I closed the door and looked at her. "Why didn't she come?"

"Because she told me to. I'm a good Putzfrau. Don't you remember the chapter in my book where the girl cleans houses in the summer for extra money? Don't worry, Professor, your place will look nice when I'm done." With that, she took off her coat, threw it on a chair, turned on the vacuum cleaner, and went right to work. I stood there feeling like a fool. She didn't look at me again. What was going on? There was nothing to do but retreat to my study and try again to call Beenie at home. The phone there rang and rang. She had to have done this for some reason, but what? She must have known I'd have a million questions. Why wasn't she here to answer them? How could she drop this girl in my lap and walk away? Where the hell was she?

Luckily, there was a small television in my room. I switched it on to fill up some mental airspace. What was Annette doing out there? The idea of a dead woman cleaning the house was monstrous and monstrously funny. I couldn't help smiling. A peculiar thought crossed my mind: she was the second dead person to be in this house. Our poor son, for all intents and purposes dead, had spent years here.

The person on television was talking about Gorgonzola cheese. I had once lived in the same universe as Gorgonzola cheese. Now I lived in one where dead students vacuumed my house and God wouldn't answer Her phone.

I sat at my desk and pretended to work by pushing pencils and papers around, looking for nothing in an address book, reading a bank statement twice because even the numbers had no meaning.

I tiptoed to my door and put an ear to it. Only the 'hoooosh' of the machine. Was she really here only to clean? Both the expression on her face and the tone of her voice had been so haughty and dismissive. She knew she held all the best cards, and I could do nothing till she made a first play. All because of a badly written, sophomoric, heavy-breathing and pale copy of -- There was a knock at the door. I forced myself not to run and open it. Count to five, rise slowly, turn the doorknob slowly. "Yes?"

"Sorry to interrupt, but I didn't know if you wanted this or not?" It was the same relic finding that Beenie had done each time she cleaned. Had she instructed Annette to do this, too? The girl held out a beat-up green spiral notebook with the word "Chargers" printed in thick black letters across the top. That was the nickname of the local high school. I assumed the book belonged to one of our girls.

"I'll take it. Thank you."

"You're welcome." She handed it to me and started to leave. "Annette? Why did you come today?"

Her face was only innocence. "To clean your house. Beenie asked me to take her place. I told you."

"Cleaning's not important. Wouldn't you rather talk about your --"

"No. She just told me to bring you things to see if you want them." She left.

I didn't know what to do. Follow her, grab her arm, sit her down and say, "Listen, dead person, you and I have to have it out. We have to talk about your bad novel." No, that wouldn't do.

I went back to my desk with the school notebook and, for want of anything better to do, opened it. "Hey, Turd Bird!"

I whipped my head aside to see who had said it, but a hand went over my mouth. Scared, I looked at whose hand. I didn't know the boy. I realized only then that we were face-to-face, very close. And I felt him. I felt him inside me down there.

"Quiet, ssh; he'll go away."

I looked at this boy. Who was he? There were three small pimples on his chin. What was he talking about? What was I doing here? We were inside a toilet stall. I was sitting on his lap. He was on the toilet seat. His pants lay below his knees.

"Hey man, come on, hurry up with her, willya?"

My lover started grinning at what his pal outside the stall had said. He pumped and pumped away inside me, that awkward position, trying to finish, trying to bring himself off, get it over with so he could go back to the class

we were both missing.

I was my daughter Freya. Quiet, dull Freya, who covered her bedroom walls with pictures of kittens and read seven-hundred-page books with titles like Love's Flame and Fury. She received average grades in school and let her sister do most of the talking and arguing. She liked to take care of Gerald. She baked him cakes and fed them to him in slow forkfuls. She was having sex on a high school toilet with a boy who was hurrying to finish so he could sneak back to class with his friend who waited on the other side of the stall door.

I was her. I could feel the boy, smell his heat and ugly cologne. The zipper on his pants cut into me.

"O.K., O.K., O.K!" Coming, he flung his head back too hard and banged it against the wall. "Damn! Oh, yeah, 'nice. Damn that hurt! Thanks, Freebie; that was good." Rubbing his head with one hand, he pushed me off gently with the other. I hovered above him on bended, quivering knees. I wanted him to say something else. Hadn't I come out here with him in the middle of my favorite class? Something nice I could hold to me when he was gone. But he was too busy pulling himself together.

"Come on, Dipwad! Five minutes left to class!"

"Right!" He zipped up quickly and reached behind me to open the door. "Seeya, Freebie. Thanks for the Freebie."

His friend outside tipped his head around the door, checked me out, and said in a loud, long falsetto, "FREEEEEEEEBIE!" The two of them snickered and were gone. I knew I should return to class, too, but, with five minutes left, what was the point? I'd use paper towels to clean off my legs, check my makeup in the mirror, and be looking O.K. again before the bell rang and anyone might see me walking out of the men's room.

I did that once when I was in high school. But the guy didn't come. We were both too scared."

Because my eyes were closed, I only heard Annette's voice and felt when she pulled the notebook out of my hands.

"Hey, don't worry, be happy! That's all you get. You can open your eyes -- you're back home."

She was squatting down in front of me, close by. Unsmiling, but I could tell she was pleased.

"Was that really Freya? Did she do that?"

"Frequently. Touch this notebook again, and you'll see many things she did. She had two nicknames in high school. 'Freebie,' as in, it's free for anyone who wants it. And 'Tunnel.' 'The Silver Tunnel.' I have something else for you that I found."

"I don't want it! Go away!"

"Oh no, you have to have it, Perlesser. There's the rules. You told me the truth; now I tell you. Why do you think she brought me back? I'm your Medusa! I tell you nothin' but the truth, and the whole truth about your life.

Remember how Beenie started finding things here? I found more."

"Beenie's not evil!"

"This isn't evil; this is the facts. I'm showing you your truth. What others thought of you, what really happened when you weren't looking ... You like telling it to other people. Here's some for you. Remember what Norah said:

"You don't have to approve of me, Dad."

"You don't know Norah!"

"No, but I know the truth. Here's treasure number two, Dad. Remember this? He loved these."

She held something out, but I was so confused that I didn't realize what it was at first.

"It's a bagel! Don't you remember how Gerald loved them? Used to walk around the house with one in his mouth? In the good old days, that is. Before you so thoughtfully shipped him away to the loony bin."

When I didn't take it, she tossed it into my lap. I didn't want it. It felt

heavy. A piece of bread.

The moment it touched me, I saw the world through his eyes. Through the eyes of Gerald/child/man/madman/animal. Colors roared and whisper-ed. They had voices. Loud -- everything was screamingly louder. Chairs weren't chairs anymore, because I didn't understand what they were. Smells -- the smallest nothing smell was an explosion a hundred times what I knew, good and bad. Chemicals, flowers, the bugs in the ground, breakfast dishes stewing in the sink. Things. I smelled them all.

My mouth. There was something in my mouth, and I liked it. I hummed around it. It was nice against my teeth. Soft.

I walked around wherever I could go. There were people sometimes. They smelled good too. Sometimes they touched me or said things at me or pushed me to be in a place or not in a place. If I didn't like the place, I'd yell. O.K., O.K., O.K., they'd say. O.K.

Everything was O.K. and tasted good, and I smelled the world and heard the people making noise. And then there was a BANG, and he came in, and I fell on the floor and yelled because here he was. He hurts me. He yells at me. He takes my arm and pulls it and yells at me. I hate him. I hate him. I hit him. I will hit and hit. That big thing will hurt. Pick it up and hit him, and he'll fall down. He is bad. Sometimes he's soft and puts me under his arm, but he's bad. The others say things to him, but they are scared, too. He yells at them, too. He goes into the room and BAMS! the door. When he's gone, people talk again and are nice. He is bad. I hate. Bad. Hate. Bad. BAM.

"Stop it!"

I don't understand.

"Stop it, Annette! Take it away from him this minute."

They yell. I don't understand. The white one comes to me and takes away my mouth thing.

I came to again in my study and understood. For the last minutes, I knew the world through my son's hideously shattered perception. The world through broken glass, fragments of beauty and terror and mystery that exceed all bounds. Disturbing beyond any bounds, truly Hell on earth, was one simple realization: my retarded son hated me. Of all the bizarre bits, scraps, slivers, pieces of our world he could grasp, the only thing he consciously knew was that he hated me. His only truth, the only genuine clearness he knew. I was bad. He wanted me dead.

"Get out of here. Go back to my place and wait for me."

"You told me to clean their house!"

"Annette, go back!"

I sat on the floor blinking, a survivor of my own life. I watched the two of them bellow at each other. The gray woman and the young one who might have been her daughter.

"Why don't you let me finish? Let me have him! He deserves it!"

"Get out, Annette. I am not going to tell you again!"

My son. His mind of stone, or air, clouds you would fall right through to the ground, but he knew how to despise me. Wanted me dead. Was I that bad? Had I been that evil?

"To him, you were, but he doesn't understand things too good, Scott. Come on; let me help you up."

I had no energy. It was fine to be sitting on the floor. I must have fallen there. I wouldn't let her pull me. Annette left the room, screaming 'ASSHOLE!' And I was an asshole. I was a miserable beast.

"He hates me. He's capable of doing that. It's astonishing. We thought he had no clear idea of anything. But he's clear enough to hate me."

"I know the feeling kid. When I told my daughter I had cancer, first thing she said, the very first, was had I made a will or not." Beenie left the room and returned with two glasses of grapefruit juice. Handing one to me, she said drink first and we'll talk in a minute. I was so empty and burned out of feeling that I'd have bitten the glass if she'd told me. I sipped, and the bitter, fresh taste of cold juice slid down my throat.

"Hey, don't you remember?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Remember what? Beenie, have I really been so bad? Such a total failure?"

"I'm not talking about that. Don't you remember your glass?" I looked at it and saw a glass. So what? "So what?"

"Don't you remember these glasses?"

I looked again. "No."

"Christmas 1975. Norah wanted to be special and have cocktails before dinner, so you told her to fill up these glasses with fruit juice for all of you."

"And we threw them in the fireplace after we were finished. I did it first. Even Gerald. He watched what we did, and threw his, too. They were expensive glasses. Roberta was furious, but ended up throwing hers, too. That was lovely. We felt Russian."

"There's been a lot of nice in your life. Ho, you're not such a bad man. You've been bad, but you're not bad. Annette just picked moments. It's easy to do that when you're talking about fifty years of moments. She's very bad. Very angry and messed up."

"What do I do now, Beenie? How do I win with her?"

"You can't. That's the problem. I thought--"

The study door crashed open, and Annette stood there, a hand out in front of her, pointing. "I don't care what you say. I've waited years for this." She started across the room for me. I didn't even have a chance to wonder what would happen, much less get up and run away, because behind her were things. Not ogres and monsters, grave things, but my things. Things I would know only because she had brought my life with her. Only, they came as vapors, colors, smells, sounds, lights, darks, forms, hints My life stood seething behind her, ready to pounce, ready to kill me with its fatal truth. Life through Gerald's eyes, my daughter in a toilet stall, things I already knew and hated or ignored. Things I didn't know, but people knew about me. Lies others had believed. Truths people said, but no one believed. Things I'd longed for, but knew would never happen. Lies I'd told myself, truths that cut deep, realizations sharp and bitter or fresh as air across ice. All of them, all of their energy and force. We think these things go away with time, like mist on an early-morning field; the sun comes up, and it burns the mist away. But it doesn't. Because I caught a glimpse of it, alive and full of power, I tell you it does not go away. Like any sound ever made, the truth of our lives remains. It is still there somewhere, forever, no matter what our memory tries to do to it.

If I'd been exposed to it longer, I'd've died. As it was, I saw enough in seconds to scald my soul the rest of my life. If I'm not mistaken, in there amongst the other facts and certainties was how long the rest of my life would be.

"Annette!" Beenie whipped an arm down as though she were pitching a baseball. The girl and what was behind her disappeared at once. Beenie made fists, held them up, and shook them at the ceiling. "Again, again, again. Why again? What is going on?"

It was not my place to ask questions at that point, so I kept quiet. Quiet and shaken. Beenie shook her fists a long time, then slowly let them fall. "I'm sorry, Scott."

"Sorry? You saved me!"

"No, I used you." She came over and sat down next to me on the floor. Before she spoke, she balled her hands again and asked, "'Why is this happening?"

"Scott, remember when I told you about the thirty-six people who make up God? At least that part is true. And the other part is, I really am one of them, dumb as I am. The lying begins with you and Annette. Remember when I said I've been watching you for years? Well, that's true, too, but not for the reasons I said.

"Years ago, when she was a senior in college, I saw Annette and knew she was the one to replace me in the thirty-six. I'm sorry I said it was you; I lied." She reached over and took my hand, gave it a squeeze, and let go. "It was never you -- it was Annette. I knew it the minute I saw her, and have been

following her ever since. Just like when Nolan saw me.

"So I told her, and, amazingly enough, she seemed to understand. In the beginning everything was fine, and the first test she had, she went right through with no problem. Then she went to graduate school and took your class. She wrote that novel, asked you to read it, and you know the rest."

"She killed herself."

It took an instant to crystallize in my mind. "Killed herself? One of the thirty-six killed themselves! How is that possible! God doesn't --"

"No, He doesn't, and that's our problem. We don't understand, either. What's worse, it's happening more than you would think. Once in a while in the past, there'd be a mistake, and something like this would happen -- but it was so rare, we paid no attention. But now something's gone very wrong and it's happening more than ever. We have to find out why. So me and a couple of others were told to get these people and bring them back. Try to find out either why they did it, or at least make peace with what caused them to do it. Maybe that way we'll begin to figure out " She grimaced, sighed.

"Because, you see, they can't be replaced if they do this to themselves--"

"People chosen to be God, people who know that and understand what that means still kill themselves.?!"

"Yup."

That's all -- "Yup? What does it mean? What does it say about the future!

There's got to be someone to replace Anette."

No one. She didn't choose anyone. She hadn't even finished taking the tests.

That's why I'm here. That's why I brought her back to see you. We don't know."

"What do you mean? You know everything, damn it! You're IT! And if God is diminished, if there are fewer of you, then good is diminished, too!"

"That's right. That's why more and more is falling apart. That's why it's so bad here."

"And Beenie, what am I supposed to do now? I'm not one of your chosen, O.K. I don't deserve to be, but what do I do with all this knowledge? What am I supposed to do now that I know it? Please take it away. Just do that -- move a hand like you did and clear it out of my head. Just do that one thing for me."

"You don't want that, Scott. You're the only one who owns your experiences. Now that you know the truth about them, use it to try and make yourself better. That's the best thing to do with it. Sure, I can wave it away, abracadabra, but you have the potential to be a much better person now that you know who you really are."

"Fate's not determined? But I saw when I was going to die!"

"That's only time on the clock. I'm talking human time. How long does it take to write a book? For some, it's fast; for others, slow. However long it takes to get down those sentences of the heart, eh? I can't show you the book you'll write, Scott. I can only help you do research and verify your sources."

Despite everything a smile popped onto my face. "Verify?"

"Yeah, I've been studying my vocabulary to keep up with you."

"You ... and your people haven't decided the future already?"

She shook her head no. God shook no. It was as simple as that.