

1.

She wakes in the middle of the night, and for a moment, she experiences that strange vertigo that comes through dreams of falling, though she can't remember any dream. The room is dark and unfamiliar, and she is afraid to sit up and look properly at the space. It's so different, she thinks, from where she normally sleeps, so alien. And then it comes back to her. Her eyes find the ghostly lines of the curtains, the corners of the room resolve into moonlight and shadows, the dimensions of the room seem to solidify into something like real life.

It's the guest room, she thinks, just the guest room with the familiar brass bed frame, the lace doilies on the antique dresser, the pictures of her grandchildren propped on a trunk by the end of the bed. She remembers, the way you remember places independent of the things that happen in them, floating over the room, with the bed made and everything in order as if the room existed somewhere else, in an alternate reality where it was never used, a perfect version of itself. She smiles to herself, thinking of it, of her home, her life in the same terms, as if it had never been lived, but the objects in it, the people all existed in their most perfect forms.

As quickly as it comes, the illusion breaks as she remembers the room from a different angle, from her back, staring at the ceiling, her arms locked around the neck of her husband, the feel of his aging body moving over her, being filled by him.

It had happened soon after their move from the city. They had been alone in the house, the first few hours after the company had left, her daughter and son in law, her grandchildren who'd helped them to move, had moved them really, because her husband couldn't really carry much since his heart attack. As for her, she'd had a pacemaker for years, so her daughter's family had moved them in and set up each of the rooms according to her wishes. So good of them, so generous. We raised them right, she thought, but they had been in a hurry, and some of the things were just out of place as happens when someone else moves you in.

She was adjusting things, moving knick-knacks from here to there, positioning pictures, refolding blankets and towels, and he'd come up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, and she had turned and kissed him, and it didn't feel exactly right because her body was too old and loose and brittle, and his was leathery and strange, but she still pulled him on top of her and laid back on the mattress and went through the motions of love with him.

They had sex other times in the house, after that, and there are other memories of sex threatening at the corners of her mind, from early in their marriage, when neither of them had been experienced, and they were still trying to teach other what each needed, or from later, when the children had been young, and they'd felt like thieves as they made love in the deepest part of the night, stealing what they needed, moment by moment, from the commitments of parenthood, or from moments later in their lives, from after the children had moved out and they'd been free to discover all they'd given up and what remained. But it's that moment, there in the bedroom, that sweeps over her, and though she can't remember whether her husband had even satisfied himself (she suspects he hadn't), this is the memory she comes back to, and it is satisfying knowing this about herself, about this room.

It almost erases last night, but not quite. The pain of it is still too fresh, the wound too raw. She is

here because of what happened last night, because there is no way around it. She knows he's no longer himself, no longer hers. He's proved it to her over and over again.

2.

The first time it happens she is sitting on the edge of her bed in the small room she shares with her sisters. She is wearing her night gown, daydreaming in an empty house, delighting in doing nothing. She is barefoot, and the scrubbed wooden floorboards feel soft and gritty. The room is cool and dark with the shades drawn over the window. Her parents and her siblings are out tending the store, but she has managed not working today by feigning a headache. She did have a slight headache this morning, but it passed almost immediately. Normally, this wouldn't be the kind of thing she could get away with. Headaches come and go, and the store still needs to be tended, her father usually points out, but this week, she bled for the first time, and her mother has been more protective ever since. She knows the special treatment won't last long. Now is the time to take advantage of it. She feels excitement along with a hint of guilt at shirking work. Her sisters shot scornful looks at her as they dressed and left the house, but neither said a word. Jealous she thinks. The day is open to her as long as she doesn't leave the house, and the possibilities are limitless. She can read or draw. She can go into her mother's room and put on the pretty dresses she saves for Sundays and holidays. She can search her sisters' diaries. She can eat the fruit in the icebox as she lies in bed. She can nap the day away. A smile brushes her lips, but fades as she hears the creak of the front door. Someone has come back to check on her.

Hurriedly, she slips back under the covers and closes her eyes. She hears the heavy tread of a man's boots. It must be her father. He'll rouse her and make her come to help at the store. It must be a busy day. She mentally rehearses an affected yawn, plans out her speech. The extra hour of sleep really made her head feel better. She's ready, now, to help out. She knows arguing with her father will be no good, and she really doesn't mind helping out in the store. Still, a slight pang of regret sweeps through her at the loss of so much possibility, so much freedom.

The sound of boots stops next to her bed. She waits for the gentle hand on her shoulder, eyes tightly closed, but it never comes. Instead the covers are peeled back. She feels the cool air on her ankles and calves, but she remains perfectly still. There is a slight stirring on her legs and she realizes the hem of her nightgown is being drawn up over her knees, over her hips. She opens her eyes and sees her uncle standing over her, looking down at her most private place. She wants to say something, but no words come. What would she say? She is too surprised to say anything at all. His hand reaches downwards and strokes the fine new hairs that have begun to grow on her pubis. Her body goes rigid at the unwelcome touch and she tries to sit up. He doesn't make eye contact, but his strong hand pushes her back down onto the mattress.

3.

*We didn't tell*

*Our father had killed a man already. In those days you could defend yourself from break-ins and things, and he owned a store. A guy had broken in and stolen some things, and then a couple of weeks later he broke in again. The third time he tried to rob the store, our father was waiting for*

*him. The police wrote it off as self defense, so nothing happened to him, but we didn't want him to kill again. We knew it was in him.*

*I was the last one to be abused. My sisters are older than I am, and each of them was molested before I was. I used to be mad about it. Why didn't they save me? Why couldn't they have warned me, and then I could have tried never to be alone, or at least never to be alone with him.*

*I used to blame them for ruining my life, but it wasn't their fault. If they'd told me, I would've told father and he would've killed our uncle. I wouldn't have understood. I couldn't have understood.*

*Once it happened to me, there was no way I could tell.*

*The experience shattered me. I was scared and ashamed. I felt like it was impossible to go on living. I went to school, and I came home. I helped cook and mind the store. I listened to stories. I even laughed. I even laughed with him. It was the most surreal thing; life went on. How could I interrupt it? What right did I have? I knew I had no power. He'd shown me that already, and it was easier, cleaner, to say nothing.*

*I spoke about it only with my sisters. We didn't speak often. Mostly, we pretended it hadn't happened. But there was a connection between us, forged in the secret, darker and perhaps deeper than sisterhood. It wasn't solidarity or anything. It's hard to talk about, but the nearest I can come to it is that it was a kind of knowing. We three understood something about the world. Only we three knew the true score, and we held the knowledge close to us.*

*It ruined our lives.*

The words have come out of her so calmly, as if she were writing her shopping list. Her daughter gave her this small, leather-bound diary a month ago. Nancy had said a diary might help her cope with the disease, as if she needed the reminder. She had thanked Nancy and promptly forgotten about the book. This is the first time she's so much as thought of it since she set it on the end table in the living room that afternoon. How strange that this should be the first thing she writes in it, the only thing she's ever written in any diary really. She never had a diary as a girl, and when she was older, there were children to take care of, and she never had time for anything like a diary.

She's never told anyone the story, not her daughter, or her sons, not even her husband, and she doesn't know why she's written it down now. There are other, practical concerns she should've written about: the difficulty of getting Thomas up and out of bed, of making him take his pills, and changing his diapers. Wouldn't those things be better to write about? Isn't that the purpose of a diary, to get out all of her frustrations so she can go on with her life? Why this? Why now?

This story is secret and shameful. This story is selfish and vain. This story is one that should never be told. Isn't that what she'd decided so many years ago?

She is momentarily embarrassed, but then anger, fierce anger burns inside of her. Why should she be embarrassed about something that happened so long ago, something from another lifetime, to another person it feels like, and she's carried back to the other night on her waves of rage. Back to

another rape, to another violation. For a moment it seems as though her life is nothing but an endless series of violations...

4.

It's the dark of early morning, the unfamiliar twilight of shades drawn back on a moonlit night, and it takes her a moment to get her bearings, to discover that she is sleeping in her guest bedroom and feel the familiar shame of it hit like the first burn of whiskey in the throat, hot and unpleasant. That she's here because of the disease, because she's sick of waking up to the acrid smell of urine and feces, to the decaying body, the decaying mind, to the fear in his eyes when he looks over and finds himself in bed with a stranger.

As quickly as the shame comes, it goes, replaced by guilt at her own thoughts and emotions, the desire to pull away, to recoil, to let go. Sadness comes, the thought of him without her, all alone in this house, wandering confused through the hall. And then a slow sort of tender ache at the thought. She remembers, not anything specific, but the life they built together, crisp white sheets with the covers turned down, stacks of dishes neatly arranged in the cabinets, the lawn freshly mown and shining with morning dew.

Movement near the bed catches eye. At first, she thinks it's the curtains stirring in the night air, but no breeze touches her cheek. There is someone else in the room. She is not afraid. She's in her own home. The familiarity of her surroundings seems to shield her. She doesn't cry out, only watches for more movement. What will happen? The shadows begin resolving into human form, the grays outlining the small, hunched shape of her husband.

She watches, silently, noting the way his skin hangs loosely on his bones. He's so thin and ragged, like a deflated beach ball, and she can see the shock of white unruly hair on his head, far longer and wilder than he would ever have let it get when he was himself. She notes the absence of his adult diaper, and wonders where it fell. She'll have to clean it up in the morning. His presence invokes a kind of pity in her. There is no comfort left, just his empty shell. He seems delicate, darling, like an antique, an heirloom. If he could stand just there for all time...

He moves, tottering, unsteady, towards the bed, towards her, and suddenly, she is nervous. It is as if he is an alien, a foreigner, a stranger in their home, an invader. She draws back as he approaches, and inward, pulling the sheets up to her ears. He moves slowly, but the room is small and in moments, he is beside the bed, and then he is in it, his frail hands, pulling away the sheets from her body, his insubstantial weight, falling on top of her, pressing her down.

His acrid breath stings her eyes and she turns her head from him. He moves his body over her like a dog humping its master's leg.

"Don't," she whispers. "Thomas, don't."

She tries to push him off, gently, but his fingers find the flesh on the underside of her arm and he's pinching her, twisting the flesh. A sharp cry escapes her and she thrashes, tries to throw him off, but he's deceptively strong, his other hand finds her breast and he pinches her nipple. She screams, but there is no one to hear her. He goes on like that, holding on as she cries and struggles.

When he's finished, he gets up and totters back to his room. She knows he won't remember it, that he's not himself, and yet this is somewhere inside of him, has been all along. In some way, she feels, she must have known it, must have deceived herself to stay with him, and if that part of her life is a deception... Maybe everything is rotten. She hates him, hates herself, hates everything and everyone. In her anger and bitterness, she wants to burn the whole world to the ground.

She wants a cigarette though she hasn't smoked in thirty years. She wants to set the smoldering, red end against the curtains and watch them catch. She wants to lay there in bed, inhaling the ashes of her life as it comes down around her. She wants the pain to wash over her one last time, and then nothing. The life she has seems, like her husband, to be a shell. All the years she told herself that this thing she'd built was worth something, worth everything. Now it's stabbing her in the back. She wishes she could have revenge, could betray her own life.

This was never what I wanted, she thinks. This was never mine.

5.

Thomas is asleep. He is almost always asleep now because of the disease. Normally, she would busy herself making dinner for the two of them, but she stays seated, stretched out along the length of the couch. She's been finding herself here more and more, reclined on the couch, thinking things over. It is a new sensation. Her whole life, she's worked hard, doing laundry, cleaning the house, cooking meals, taking care of others. She feels like she hasn't just sat down and thought for fifty years. And what thoughts she's been having. The pills are what she dwells on. There are any number of pills they both take, and perhaps if they were mixed up accidentally...

She has stopped herself on the edge of this thought a lot lately. But why not think it through this once. She decides to allow it, to indulge herself. She thinks of him dying, probably in his sleep. He sleeps so much, and then when whoever it is comes to take the body all she'd have to do is cry and say he'd mixed up his pills and they'd killed him. Maybe they wouldn't even ask questions she thinks. Maybe they'd just assume it was the disease and cart him off to the funeral home. She'd plan a nice funeral for him with flowers and kind words and she'd wear black and weep as she stood by the casket. Her children would all visit her, and she could cook a nice meal, a meatloaf. Thomas never liked her meatloaf, and she hasn't cooked it in so long. She can smell the savory aroma of it already. Her children will love it, and they would all be so kind and sympathetic, not resentful and anxious like they are now. They hate seeing their father like this almost as much as she does.

She is on her feet, the medicine cabinet open and the bottles of pills in her hands. Today is Thursday, and she has the weekly pill container out. She opens Friday and drops in two of her own heart pills, and then she closes the lid and replaces the bottles on the shelf. Her hands shake slightly as she closes the cabinet door and turns to face her new life, the new possibilities that will soon be open to her. Tomorrow, she will take control of her life. Tomorrow, she will be free. Tomorrow...

Why not now, she thinks. Why not do it now and begin her life a few hours ahead of schedule. She's waited seventy years for this already. She turns back and opens the pill case. She fumbles

with the pills inside, trying to get them back out of the little compartment. He won't feel a thing, she thinks. When her husband had a sound mind, she remembers him once saying,

"If I ever get to be so old I can't take care of myself, you should just kill me. I never want to be like that." At the time, they'd seemed such idle words.

"You've never been able to take care of yourself," she'd joked.

They'd laughed at it, never expecting to be here, never expecting to come to this point, to a time when their bodies would fail them. And yet, she thinks that maybe he'd meant it. Maybe he didn't want her to struggle to lift him from his bed, or to wipe shit off of his balls when he could no longer make it to the bathroom. Maybe he will be better off.

Yes, she decides. He'll be so much better off, so much happier, so much less frightened and alone. She'll just wake him up and persuade him to take the two tablets and then he'll fall back asleep and in the morning, he'll be gone to a better place.

She frees the pills and clutches them close to her chest. Gone, she thinks, and she is suddenly crying. Thomas has been her friend and partner for so long. Fifty years she thinks. Longer. She's loved him for most of that time, and he's loved her. She remembers how their first Christmas together, he'd bought her underwear. She was embarrassed by it, but it was so sweet, so tender. It had made her feel sexy, the first time she'd ever felt sexy. She remembers how kind her husband was to her for so many years. He'd never laid a hand on her or the children. He'd never shouted or cursed at her. He was a good man, and if he had faults, she had long since forgiven him.

And yet, there was the other night. All the more reason to set him free, she thinks. That man who attacked her was not her husband. It was an imposter in Thomas's body. It was her uncle back from the grave. Anger rips through her body.

She's steady now as she walks down the hall, the pills held tight in her sweating hand. She opens the door to his room and the stench of shit and urine hits her like a slap in the face. She can see his shriveled form, humped up under the covers. The sight of him, so diminished, so weak and shrunken, strengthens her resolve. She touches his back gently, rubs his shoulder.

"Thomas," she calls in a soft voice. "Thomas, wake up." He does not stir. She shakes him gently, pulls the covers down revealing the unruly curls on the back of his head. He's like a child.

She runs her fingers gently through his hair, and tenderness for this man wells up within her. She must free him. "Thomas," she calls again, and her voice is shaking now. She is sobbing, and now she shakes him harder and screams his name, and still, he does not respond. She sits on the edge of the bed and pulls his head into her lap and cries and cries until her eyes have no more tears and her heart is wrung. She opens her hand, and the pills fall to the floor with soft clicks. "You're free," she wants to say. "You're free." But the words are stuck in her throat. "I'm free."

When she can speak again, she picks up the phone and dials. "Come over," she says when the line picks up. "I'm making meatloaf," before the tears again overcome her.