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Alone in the quiet house, Mary waits behind the locked front door. This is for Mary's own good, she has been told. Call if you need anything, her daughter-in-law, Charlotte, has told her many times. But Mary doesn't want anything that Charlotte has to offer. No trip to the emergency room, no visit from the plumber or the electrician. No, Mary just needs her life back and she is waiting for the mailman to rescue her. If she can only get the mailman's attention, she will ask him to take the key that is always left under the front doormat and open the front door for her. A simple request. Anyone would be happy to oblige an old woman shut up all alone in a house. She suspects it's not even safe-- being locked in a house that you need a key to get out of.

"It's for your own safety," Charlotte had said.

"But what if a fire breaks out?" Mary had asked.

"Oh, Mom, Charlotte replied, exasperated, "Why do you always imagine the worst?"

Why indeed.

She takes off her glasses and leans close to the window, eyes anxiously sifting the afternoon blur of brightly dressed children for the blunt blue of the postman. She spots him now turning the corner, bag over one shoulder, but as luck would have it, he does not look up as he approaches the house. Mary waves frantically from the window but his attention is focused on the mail in his hand. Too late she realizes she must open the window to get his attention but it won't budge. She desperately grasps the brass fittings, putting her back into it. The resistance fills her with unaccustomed anger and disappointment. Then she hears the

scraping sound of the mailbox closing. Can it really be that she is going to miss her opportunity? She knocks on the window until her knuckles sting but he is already at the next house. How can it be that he does not hear? Then she sees it - wires sprouting from his ears - one of those contraptions everyone seems to have these days. She watches him go on down the block and she is alone again.

Well, that's it, then, she thinks. Perhaps she does need to be protected like some sort of endangered species. There was that time around the corner when she thought she was in a strange neighborhood without a clue how to get home. Her legs had deserted her too that time so she just sat on the curb and waited. That nice police lady found a letter from Social Security in her handbag with her new address -John and Charlotte's, her son and daughter-in-law. Why hadn't she thought of that? After that, she had promised not to go out anymore on her own.

But then she had just walked out one day to go to the butcher. Charlotte had said later that she was obstinate but the truth was she had simply forgotten she had ever made that promise. Funny. There she was walking down the street mouth watering set for that good German bologna -- she could almost smell it. She got down to the corner and went to turn on to Arthur Avenue. There was no Arthur Avenue. No butcher either. Just some street called Fifth Street.

“It's the void, Sam,” she'd said.

Sam knew all about the void. The first time it happened she'd been terrified; thought she was going out of her mind. It was like being under water, trying to fight your way back up before you ran out of air. Sam always said there was no need to fight. “If you just let yourself go, you will always rise up into the light and air.” Even now with Sam gone, she can still feel the

pressure of his hands pulling her up, as real as the sound of his words in her ear. She hopes she will never forget that feeling.

Mary remembers evenings with Charlotte and John before she came to live here. After dinner they would all go into the living room for coffee. There would be Charlotte's laptop and cell phone. If the laptop was open, that meant it would be a short evening because Charlotte had work to do. The laptop was always open. Sam would joke that the day the laptop closed, he'd expect a grandchild nine months later. Sam had a way about him, all right. Now the living room is Mary's bedroom. Every night after her evening bath upstairs, Mary sees Charlotte on the bed in front of her laptop, surrounded by papers. John is in his studio in a corner of the kitchen working on a painting. They never seem to spend evenings together.

Mary often thinks about loss these days. She has lost a lot since Sam's death, but she has not lost Sam. That is her secret. They had been so close for so long. Like when they were first lovers, she cannot forget the feel of his skin, his early morning whiskers, even the weight of him. She wonders if in their intimacy they had exchanged molecules in some important way. Smells of Sam seem to generate from within her so that now and then she'll be caught short by the pungency of cherry tobacco or Old Spice. And his thoughts. She might forget where she lives sometimes, but she can always remember what Sam might say about something and the sound of his voice saying it.

Other losses are harder to bear. They had planned so carefully for their future, but who could have predicted that they would use their entire savings prolonging Sam's life? And they had succeeded, hadn't they? Two precious years. The relatives said the quality of his life was

inferior, not worth living. Let him die peacefully, no more pain, no traumatic operations. Perhaps that would have been possible if he had gone away from her. But he was always there. Even after the stroke when he could no longer smile or speak, he was still there. She could see it in his eyes. She could feel his presence just as she always had, just as she still does. So she had bought him every chance, until their funds had dissipated along with his strength. In doing so she had never dreamed that her life would come to this - where her entire vision of herself has been overruled. She wonders if this is the way it's supposed to be. Does your life just unravel one day like an old sweater?

In the evening when everyone thinks she is asleep, Mary combs the want ads of the New York Times. She ignores "classy, savvy, interface with Fortune 500 clients. MS Word, Excel, PowerPoint a must." She knows her limitations. There are dozens of others that seem to be looking for someone just like her -- "dependable person to meet greet clients, answer phones, friendly, down to earth, well-groomed, mature, outgoing, people person, sense of humor a +. She has an idea that she will get a job in New York City. The train station to New York is only half a block away. When she was a young woman she worked in the City as a secretary for five years. She knows that there are endless opportunities within walking distance of Grand Central Station. The next step is to find out what times the trains leave. She remembers seeing John put a schedule into one of those little side pockets in his briefcase. It is there in the foyer as usual. She picks it up and starts to put her hand into one of the pockets, then stops. She has always respected her son's privacy. She can call up the train station tomorrow. The satchel is almost empty and as she lets it drop to the floor, she hears a metallic clank. Reaching in, her fingers meet a gaggle of metal objects. John's keys. Closing her eyes, she slips the keys into her pocket.

Her bed faces the kitchen door and as she drifts off to sleep that night she can see the thin line of light under the closed door. She can hear soft voices from within. She is a child in her parents' bed, their soft voices a lullaby. Safe and warm, she turns on her side and curls up in a ball. The keys fall out of her pocket. Silly girl. She has gone to bed in her bathrobe again.

"Senility," they are saying or is it "New York City." Her stomach contracts at the thought of either.

"It's just a place," Sam soothes. Or is that Charlotte talking?

Charlotte is saying "there's a place – a place at the nursing home."

"There are just some people you never turn your back on," Sam says, or is that John? Her hand finds the keys and clutches them to her breast.

Mornings are the trickiest. In the sleepy transition to wakefulness, the old Mary returns - Sam's wife, ageless and hopeful. In the roll-away bed, her hand absently explores the cool uninhabited space next to her. Sam is not there. She has become his widow. Her hand recedes to her side. Now she feels the familiar pressure of the metal ribs of the bed beneath the thin mattress, a gentle reminder that home is no longer the antique four-poster with the hand-made chintz canopy. No longer the parquet floors they had sanded and varnished to a satin sheen. No longer the den and the sewing room, the cluttered cellar, the sunny kitchen. Now home is simply a place to be, a waiting room.

There is nothing she'd like better than to get up and make breakfast for her son -- French toast and bacon, fresh orange juice, flowers on the table, the paper to read. Just the thought of it

fills her with energy until she hears the sound of Charlotte's footsteps overhead. Too late.

Charlotte will be down in a few minutes to take possession of the kitchen. Whatever Mary tries to do, Charlotte will stop, telling her to rest, a euphemism for "This is my kitchen." Then she remembers the keys that she had taken the night before. After today, everything will be different. You can surely get some sort of a job, doesn't have to be much. Just enough for a room somewhere with a little kitchen. John can come visit once a week if that all he can do. Charlotte will be welcome too if she behaves herself. You'll make all his favorites -- pot roast, leg of lamb, real mashed potatoes, not some flakes out of a box. John can bring his shirts to you instead of that laundry that sends them back with broken buttons. You'll wash them by hand if you have to. Maybe you'll even read to each other again the way you used to. We were so busy with The Hardy Boys and Walter Farley's horse stories, we never even touched Dickens. Never touched him.

In the kitchen, the sink is piled high with last night's dinner dishes. She barely has time to fill the dishpan with water when she hears Charlotte's footsteps racing down the stairs. She is late as usual and probably annoyed that John is procrastinating in the shower, singing his morning medley of 60's tunes.

"Eggs or cereal?" she calls up the stairs.

Three muffled syllables.

"Cereal," she says as she races to the refrigerator. "He wants cereal. Please God, let there be milk and a banana wouldn't hurt either."

Mary continues to wash, caught up in a reverie of dunking and rinsing that is like prayer.

The familiar motions are soothing and revitalizing. Abruptly, Charlotte twists the faucets closed. "Mom, that's why we have a dishwasher," she says in carefully measured tones. She takes the dinner plates from the drain board and loads them into the machine, her movements bright with precision and authority. Mary stands back feeling like a six-year-old, arms growing numb with uselessness. Charlotte looks at her then, "Aren't I awful, I didn't even say good morning." She pecks Mary's cheek, asking, "Could you get the coffee, please?" in a voice so apologetic she might as well be asking her to move the house down the block.

Mary must go to the pantry to find the coffee. By the time she returns, the dishes are gone, spirited away for a more economical and sanitary treatment. The machine hums and lurches triumphantly into the first wash cycle. By the time John comes in, hair still wet, shirttails hanging, breakfast is ready -- three bowls on the table accompanied by a family size assortment of cereals and two black-skinned bananas.

"Where's my eggs, Charls?" he says. "I said eggs, scrambled eggs. Mom and I want eggs, don't we, Mom?"

He squeezes Mary's hand. Mary smiles tentatively, watching Charlotte, and touches his face. His skin is smooth and delicate, like his dad's.

"Fine." says Charlotte, getting up from the table. "So let her make them for you. I'm late as it is." She leaves the kitchen, muttering, "Who am I to come between a boy and his mother?"

"Never mind, Mom," says John, kissing her forehead. "She didn't mean anything. She just gets in a bad mood whenever she's late. And she's always late," he adds, in his best Groucho

Marx imitation, tapping imaginary cigar ashes into her cereal bowl. And he kisses her again, trying to dispel the unfamiliar aura of dissent that his wife's actions have brought into their relationship. Then he is gone, too, and Mary sits pondering the breakfast cereal serenaded by an electric dishwasher and coffee pot duet.

It's a June day, her birth month and the month of her wedding. A good time for beginnings, she thinks. The openness of the sidewalk is dizzying after the confines of the four walls. She imagines herself walking a tightrope or a balance beam and wonders if she should have brought her cane for balance. But she had never wanted to walk with a cane. It had been a present from the kids and after a while, she had grown fond of the secure feel of it in her hand and had even taken to leaning on it a bit. She hadn't wanted it to become another point of no return - another concession. A little dizziness she can handle. She has heard about people a lot younger than she, people with head injuries, for instance, who have to go through life being dizzy every day. If they can do it, she certainly can.

She is more concerned about the disorientation that had replaced her knowledge of where she lived with a cold dark void. But she reminds herself that the void can be waited out like the blackness on the television screen that with a sudden flicker, transforms itself into a world of information and activity.

"One step at a time," Sam's voice reminds her.

When the train comes, she is happy to see the cushioned seats and doors that slide open invitingly. The trains she had known years ago were rickety affairs with cracked cane seats that

tore women's hose and windows that were stuck closed or open. It pleases her to see that the world is becoming a more comfortable place. Now that she is on her way, things that she has become accustomed to living with suddenly seem unendurable. Like the no unsupervised cooking edict. One day she had forgotten to turn off the gas. No one was more shocked or concerned than she was. But she had learned from the experience and realized that she must take extra special care in the future. Charlotte never gave her the chance. Every day before she went to work, she removed the knobs from the stove.

She should never have fallen asleep. Awakened by a soft tap, she tries to read her destination in the face of the conductor. She does not know where she was going before the soft rocking of the train lulled her to sleep.

"Grand Central, Ma'am," he says, as the train pulls into the station.

She walks off the train letting herself be pulled up the platform steps in the wake of other passengers. People who know where they are going. Panic, she knows, will snap the remaining threads of awareness completely. So she breathes deeply and moves forward with small steps until she find a bench in the terminal. She has learned a trick. There will be clues in her purse. She opens it and sifts the contents. An old plastic compact -- she should really get a new one. A dog-eared library card from the old neighborhood. A change purse. A house key. She turns it over in her hand remembering how close she had come to losing it this morning. After breakfast, she had sat in the kitchen listening for the sound of the front door closing. She hoped that John will not check to see if he has his keys. He won't miss them for one day. He always comes home with Charlotte anyway, who has her own set. But it was taking too long. They were

not leaving. She heard footsteps approaching the kitchen. "I'm sure they're in here," John had said. Mary sat at the kitchen table with her hand in the pocket of her duster nervously clutching the keys. To make matters worse, they brought the satchel into the kitchen and started to examine it right in front of her. Mary bit her lip and prayed that no one will ask her directly about the keys. She cannot lie in response to a direct question.

Her body started to rise up out of the chair as if threatening to carry her against her will and place her in front of her son where she will have to confess. But she counseled herself to sit down and remain calm. She has to have her freedom. Without freedom, life can be lived, but without usefulness, it wasn't the life she wanted. Finally, much to her relief, John decided he must have left the keys in his office. He kissed her goodbye as she sat like a statue at the kitchen table. As Charlotte bent down to kiss her also, Mary looked up at John, letting him see the truth in her eyes. He smiled.

In an envelope in her purse, she finds the ads for the jobs she had decided to apply for. They are all on 42nd Street within a block or two of Grand Central. All she has to do is figure out how to get up to the street. "Just follow the crowd," Sam says, "there's only one way to go and that's up."

The Gibbons group turns out to be a potbellied man in a wrinkled plaid jacket stationed behind a tiny desk. Underneath a pile of yellowed newspapers comes the muffled sound of a telephone ringing, which he ignores. He is reading a dog-eared tabloid and using the overflowing wastepaper basket as an ashtray. She has to clear her throat several times before he acknowledges her presence. When he does, it is to size her up with a quick glance and mutter,

"Office hours don't start til noon. Come back."

She continues to stand in front of the desk watching the man smoke and read. Turning a page, he says, "Look, if it's about the leak, we already know about it. A man's on the way, so don't go calling Central Complaints on us."

"I'm not here about a leak."

"Well, the buzzer, then. That'll be fixed on Tuesday."

"It's not about the buzzer."

"If you're collecting for something, forget it. I already gave at home." This breaks him up. He roars with laughter followed by a fit of coughing. "Get it? Get it? Gave at home? That's a good one." He finally calms down enough to focus on her. "Okay, you've ruined my concentration. What's the story?"

"I'm here about the job."

His smile instantly disappears. "Too old. Go home. Someone must be looking for you."

"Please. No one is looking for me. I may be old, but I can certainly answer phones. I need a job."

"Not here you don't. Get on with you. I don't need these headaches."

"Wouldn't you at least try me out?"

"No way. No Ma'am. Didn't you ever hear of retirement? Go retire. Don't bother me."

"I just...."

"No way," he states, widening his eyes emphatically. After this exertion, he settles back

into his paper.

"No way," he tells the paper.

At the patent attorney's offices, she waits in a room full of young women. They all seem to be around twenty years old. They are called into the inner office one by one and they leave one by one until eventually only Mary remains. After an hour, she is politely told that no interviews are being given that day.

"But the paper says Monday through Friday, 9 to 5," she says. "This is Monday and it's only noon."

"That is so," says the grey-haired receptionist, a seasoned screener, "but the person giving the interviews has called in sick."

"But those young women - weren't they here about the job? They were all seen by someone."

"That is no concern of yours."

"Well, I'm not trying to pry. It just seems obvious that they were being interviewed. It only seems fair that I be given a chance. I've been waiting a long time.

The other woman looks at her for a long time. Finally, she sighs and shuts her eyes momentarily as if to try to change the picture before her. "Can't you see? They're not going to hire a woman your age. I'm not supposed to say that, but it's the truth. This is a pretty menial position. They want to hire some high school girl and pay her minimum wage."

"Oh, is that it?" says Mary. "But I'd be happy to work for minimum wage. I just need a job, don't you see?"

"Really. I feel for you," the receptionist tells her. "But they only hire high school girls. She'll stay for a few years until she gets married or goes to college or whatever. And then they hire another one. It's company policy."

"It's company policy to hire high school girls?"

"No, of course not. That sounds ridiculous." says the other woman, starting to redden. "I'm just trying to tell you in a nice way that you wouldn't be happy here. If you don't care about money, why don't you try volunteer work or maybe some special programs for the elderly? I'm sure your town must have something like that."

Yes, something like that.

Back on the street, the heat is waiting to wrap itself around her like a second skin. As Sam used to say, "42nd Street and Fifth Avenue is the hottest spot on the face of the earth." Here there are no sunless canyons as in the narrower streets. The sun's rays reflect off glass and steel and rise in waves from the broad white sidewalks. She imagines herself lost in a desert trudging across a wavering ribbon of sand alert only for the sight of shade and water. She walks no more than a block when she feels the intensity of the heat slowing her down. Her breathing grows shallow, her steps smaller and less sure, until the penetrating heat simply stops her in her tracks. She is a hairsbreadth away from being asleep on her feet. If she does not look up, she will be all right, but her attention is caught by the images of clouds reflected in its dark glass facade of a towering highrise that appears to be leaning backwards into the sky. And when she raises her head to watch the pretty white clouds floating in the blue reflection, that upward sweep of the

building carries her into unconsciousness.

In the ambulance, she thinks of Sam. He would have looked at her in that offhand way of his and say, "You did what you did. Those are the facts. If you could have done differently, you would have. Why be sorry? You did what you wanted, didn't you? You just didn't think it would turn out this way. There's no going back. So just rest awhile." She rests.

At the hospital she causes a slight commotion by forgetting her address. But they look in her purse and find it along with Charlotte's number. She should have taken the number out, but now they are already calling Charlotte.

"You got away lucky this time," Charlotte is saying. "It was just the heat and exhaustion. You might have had a stroke, though. What possessed you? We had a bargain. You agreed not to leave the house. Why, if you wanted to go to New York, we would have taken you. What in the world were you doing, Mom? Mary?"

Mary does not respond. She has found an unreachable place, a retreat. She likes the feeling of this new freedom. She hears Charlotte quite clearly going on about their bargain, about compromise, commitment and promises. She is only applying these words to Mary, of course, and Mary knows that these words have nothing to do with her. There is no bargain. There is only Charlotte's plan. Now Charlotte is trying to say that Mary had broken some agreement, gone back on her promises. She is making this all lead up to something, twisting it all around into a crisis. How could they coexist under the same roof when Mary will not keep her promises has become the question of the moment that must be answered.

"And I'm not even going to tell John about today, Mom. If we tell him, he'll be out of his

mind with worry. But I need you to tell me what to do." Charlotte is saying.

But Mary cannot tell Charlotte what to do because Mary has decided she will no longer speak Charlotte's language. Charlotte is painting a picture with words and the picture is supposed to be their life. It doesn't matter if no one sees the picture but Charlotte.

Mary knows that physically she has evolved into a new version of herself.. She is not even the same person who started out on the train this morning. Decisions, desires, actions and events have transported her to a new place -- a place where she can come to terms with the fact that there are some things she can no longer do. But she does not accept that in one short year the rich life she enjoyed with Sam has been distilled down to a few permitted activities like some kind of perverse chemistry. Perhaps she is not as good at doing things as she used to be. Isn't it perfect that she no longer requires the precision of her youth?

"So what do you think, Mom?" Charlotte is asking. Something about a nursing home.

A more suitable arrangement. Dying with dignity. This girl makes such gigantic concepts out of simple things like death. To Charlotte, death is a problem to be solved, like algebra. Mary knows that death is not the alien thing that people make it out to be. Her death is a part of her, waiting to be realized, like a thought, an instinct. Just as growth once was, death is an inclination that her body knows how and when to follow. Just not now.

Sam used to say that you could define people not by how they furnished their homes, but by how they furnished the inside of their heads. Mary imagines the inside of Charlotte's head. There must be a collection of towering structures with big signs reading Commitment, Dignity, Promises, Death. Perhaps there is a little Charlotte scrambling over them trying to grab hold. And like Alice in Wonderland, searching for something to eat to bring her back to normal size so

she could cope with them, finding herself standing on tiptoe peeking over the edge of Eternity, only to find herself face to face with a large blue caterpillar.

Mary giggles at the thought and decides that even though she lives in Charlotte's house, she does not have to live inside of Charlotte's head. The inside of Mary's head is her own domain and she will furnish it with her own familiar surroundings, her love for her family and her pleasure in the simple tasks of living.

"Mother, aren't you going to answer? What's so funny?"

Mary looks at her watch. Almost 4 o'clock. She'd like to be at home starting supper. She isn't sure how she is going to accomplish this, but she is going to try. Going to try with everything she has. And if she can't get it done today, well, she will just try again tomorrow. She'll make pot roast with carrots and red potatoes and a nice thick gravy -- just the way John loves it. After supper, they'll wash the dishes together, the way they used to. She will be his mother again, not some irrelevant shadow. She relaxes into the hospital bed and closes her eyes. She is aware of the hum of Charlotte's voice beside her. The sound of that voice reminds Mary that everything she wants for herself might be impossible. The thought makes her tired and she sleeps awhile until she arrives again at the moment of awakening when her spirit emerges alone and unencumbered, ageless and hopeful. The moment when the old Mary came back, as instantly recognizable as an old friend who comes to remind her that regardless of time and events, she is still the same old Mary.