

The Volunteer's Friend

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Tate is at the hospital again, watching a wall-mounted television screen, following the camera as it worms its way around the bright pink walls of his lower digestive tract. It moves quickly, forward and back, stopping on a patch of tissue for a second or two, and then off again. The nurses warned him that the camera's progress would feel like bubbles rising and bursting in his abdomen, and indeed it does. On television his colon looks slick, enormous, almost inhabitable. He closes his eyes.

The last time he was here was with his wife, Jeanne, two years ago. The antiseptic smell of an examining room is a smell he now associates with her, the velcro rip of the blood pressure cuff. He can hardly stand it. But the pain in his stomach has become too insistent, the symptoms too certain, to ignore. He's waited long enough to know that waiting won't fix what's wrong with him.

"There," the doctor says.

Tate opens his eyes. "What?"

"A lump, a discoloration." A tiny white plus sign appears on the television, followed by another a few inches lower, and then a third and a fourth. Four straight lines connect them and form a rectangle. Within the rectangle, Tate sees a bulging scuff mark the color of a cheap tattoo. "Right there," the doctor says. "It could be nothing. Could be more than nothing."



More trips to the hospital, more tests. The doctor uses terms familiar to Tate from his wife's illness: biopsy, colonoscopy. He drinks two gallons of liquid that tastes like charred grapes. One final test, and the nurse is making a joke about the weather. She tells him he should get dressed, which he does, slowly, before going to the doctor's office to wait. Through the office's curtainless window is a wooden jungle gym with a chain bridge where a young girl sits, head down, legs dangling between the slats. The doctor walks in and closes the door. Spiky-haired and young with purplish eyelids, he looks like one of those television prodigies. Tate steadies himself. The lump, the discoloration are more than nothing.

"There are several courses available to the patient," the doctor says, then corrects himself. "To you."

The worry is it spreading to his liver or his lymph nodes which, the doctor explains, pointing to his own neck, are important to his immune system. Tate wishes someone had come along to listen to the doctor for him, as he did for Jeanne. How he clung to each word then, searching for the smallest possibility of hope! He doesn't have the energy to go through it again. He turns back to the window and the girl, whose neck, Tate sees, is covered with livid burns. The girl stands up and jumps into wet sand, wet from a heavy downpour earlier; in the examining room, the nurse said, "Thought I might have to come to work in a rowboat."

Currently, Tate realizes that the doctor is attempting to comfort him, and that he should say something. "I wish Jeanne was here," he says.

"Understandable." The doctor probably saw Jeanne's name somewhere in his paperwork. "I could have someone from the hospital come by your house. To talk to you. I could do that."

"No, no," Tate says. "I'll be all right. I shouldn't have said that out loud."

The doctor is scribbling something in his notepad.



A few weeks of treatment and Tate feels raw and worn out. He's been fitted with a permanent catheter in his chest which makes it difficult to sleep. When he does sleep, he dreams he is contagious and has to walk around in a surgical mask, handing out cards explaining his illness. The only foods he eats regularly are bananas and toast. All else leaves him nauseous or planted on the toilet for a half-hour, or both. He brings catalogs into the bathroom and reads through them, clothing catalogs, catalogs advertising imported and hard-to-find candles. When he stands up, there are warped red marks on his thighs from where he's rested his elbows.

He receives get-well cards from the same people who sent sympathy cards two years before. One of the cards depicts a glass of wine and says, *A little aging, a certain amount of mellowing...*

Not long after she was diagnosed, Jeanne decided to redecorate the condo. She'd read an article saying there were two types of living spaces: *healing* spaces and *weakening* spaces. She wanted a healing space. Slowly she started getting rid of their things and refurnishing the condo in an Oriental style, searching through flea markets and junk stores for anything fitting this description. Whenever Tate tried to talk about her sickness, Jeanne changed the subject or ignored him. She didn't want to discuss being sick or getting better, she wanted to talk about the perfect new tea table, or the limited-edition Confucius figurines.

She never did get a chance to finish. Much of their old dark oak furniture remains, but now with jade plants and bamboo window shades, watercolors of flute-playing courtesans on the walls, pillows stitched with Chinese characters. A month after the funeral, a wooden abacus arrived in the mail, which Tate hung in the kitchen above the toaster oven. Now, waiting for his toast to finish, he studies the abacus, two beads in one column, five in the other. It's one of those things that gives no hint at all as to how it works. In the kitchen, in the condo, Jeanne is everywhere visible, nowhere present. Sometimes, Tate feels like putting an ad in the paper, selling it furnished, and moving.



One afternoon, after a pair of Leukovril injections, after the doctor had asked how he feels, Tate admits that he wouldn't mind having somebody visit. "Understandable," the doctor says. This is his favorite word. A few days later, a volunteer from the hospital stops by. She wears cumbersome sunglasses which she removes when Tate answers the door. She is young with far-apart blue eyes. Her name is Callie, she tells him, short for Calandra.

"Very nice," she says in the foyer, stepping out of her sandals. "Very eclectic."

They sit across from each other in the living room. He offers her a glass of water; she accepts, and insists on getting it herself. Her silver anklet makes a tiny sound when she walks away. Tate reaches down to the floor, picks up a paperclip, and pockets it. He has no idea what to say to her. When she returns she drinks the water in a single long sip. Finished, she reaches into her purse and pulls out a book called *The Big Questions* which, she says, she always uses when meeting with new friends. By *friends*, Tate understands, she means the people she volunteers to visit for the hospital. "Are you ready?" she asks, opening the book.

He assumes she'll offer something vague and impersonal. Instead she asks, "Would you be willing to tear the wings off a rare and beautiful butterfly for an all-expense-paid trip to anywhere in the world?"

He thinks about it for a second, then says, "Do you mean right now? Right this minute?"

"Right now." She crosses her legs, skinny with a tanline just above the anklet. "I hand you a rare and beautiful butterfly and all you have to do is tear its wings off for

a trip to Paris.”

“I’ve already been to Paris. Years ago with my wife, Jeanne. She was born there. Paris was about what I expected it would be.”

“You can go anywhere, Tate. Africa, China. All you have to do is—” She makes a tearing gesture with the book.

“I’ve never been to China. I guess I’d pick China.”

“So your answer’s yes?”

He tries to think about the question, but keeps stumbling on the opposing condition. What does killing a butterfly have to do with traveling? The girl is straightening the corner of the page, which has been dog-eared, looking at the page with raised eyebrows, distracted but aware of his hesitancy. “Of course not,” he says. “I’ve never enjoyed traveling alone. Plus the butterfly. No, my answer’s no.”

“There’s no correct answer,” she says.

“I don’t like that one. Try another.”

The others are similarly baffling. “Your wife and child are bitten by a snake and you only have enough antivenom for one of them. What do you do?” The questions are intended to be thought-provoking, but mostly they confuse and depress him. The girl stays for a little over an hour. When she leaves Tate washed her glass and set it on the drying rack. From his kitchen window, he watches her get into a small black car, sit for a few minutes in the driver’s seat, and then drive off.

He’s glad the hospital sent a woman, though he wishes she was older. His neighbors are nosy; if they see her leaving his condo, they’ll assume something lurid is going on. Jeanne was always cordial to them, and they think this means that Tate will be too. They’ll ask, “Do you have some family visiting or something, Tate?” hoping to surprise him into an admission. He isn’t interested in befriending his neighbors and sees no reason to pretend otherwise, especially now. If one of them asks, Tate decides he’ll say no, his family isn’t visiting. His neighbors are free to assume what they want to assume.



Callie visits twice a week. Tate learns that she went to college to study nursing, but never finished. Now she wants to be a writer, or maybe a film director. Currently, she says, she is happy volunteering at the hospital. She sees no reason to go back to college to study writing. “I want to be able to draw from a variety of experiences,” she says. “I already know what school’s like.” She talks about herself as if from a great distance looking back. Once in a while she stammers over a word—“I enjoy spending time with seer, series”—pauses, closes her eyes, and then begins the sentence again: “I enjoy spending time with serious people.” She means him.

They walk to a park a few blocks from his condo. The park was once a little petting zoo with dwarf goats and alpacas where Tate used to bring his nieces and nephews when they came to town. That was a long time ago. Now, young couples sit together reading the newspaper on bedsheets in the overgrown grass. Some boys throw a frisbee. It lands in front of Tate, who hands it to Callie, who tosses it back to the teenagers. The two sit on a metal picnic table so Tate can catch his breath. The sun is a blinding smear shape, so intense that Tate, in a floppy hat that Callie insisted he wear, feels its individual rays all around him. Callie wears sunglasses, her hair pulled into two thin braids. Tate looks around for a bathroom while Callie describes the plot of a book he’s never heard of. He’s had to pee since they left the condo but is too embarrassed to tell her.

A middle-aged man in oil-cloth coveralls approaches, smiling with his mouth open. “I know a woman haunts me all night long,” he sings. “I know a woman with a body won’t quit —”

“Go away, Adam,” she interrupts.

The man regards Tate. His shiny lips seem poised on an insult.

“It’s a song,” Callie says after the man walks off. “And the coveralls, they’re just

ornamental. Adam doesn't do anything all day but creep people out and loiter." She exhales loudly and then looks at him. "Are you okay, Tate? Are you hot?"

"I'm a little warm. We should probably go back."

But when he stands, his insides constrict, and he knows he won't make it to the condo without finding a bathroom. He looks around again and says, "I really need to use a bathroom. Soon."

Callie smiles slightly before catching herself. She lifts her sunglasses and looks around the park, at him. "Well, I believe we have no choice but to find you a nice large shrub."

She leads him to the far end of the park. The boys stop their frisbee-throwing to watch her go. They look as if they want an explanation. Behind a red-budded hedge that separates the park from a row of aluminum-sided duplexes, Tate unzips his pants and Callie stands watch over the park. He waits. He breathes deeply, tries to relax, waits some more, but nothing happens.

"I don't hear anything," she says. "Tate? Are you having stage-fright?"

She walks behind him and he fumbles with his pants, struggles to zip them up. "This is extremely common," she says. "Listen, you need to straighten your back, relax, and breathe."

"Would you go stand where you were?" he says. "I don't need any help with this."

"Deep breaths," she says, backing up. "Know that I'm not the sort of person who's passing judgment." She begins whistling chaotically and Tate straightens his back and relaxes. Cloud wisps blow past the sun, dimming the ground behind the hedges for brief intervals. He closes his eyes and shivers.

On the way home, Callie says things like, "It's extremely common," and, "Don't think a thing of it."

He doesn't want to talk about it anymore. "The man from earlier," he says after awhile. "How do you know him?"

"Adam? He's someone I used to visit for the hospital," she says. "He was sick."

"What happened?"

"He got better." She crosses her arms, then leans forward to wipe her mouth on her hands. "Often I have that effect on people."

Tate can't tell whether or not she's joking. This would be a good time to pay her a compliment or to thank her for visiting, but he can't think of a casual-enough way to say it. He doesn't want to scare her. Arms crossed, a half-step in front of him, she looks lost in thought. They walk back to the condo without talking.



Slowly Tate's appetite returns. Though he's still worn out, especially on the days he goes to the hospital for treatment, the nausea starts to subside enough for him to eat at The Scripp's again. When he returns from the hospital, he lies down and almost instantly sinks into a black sleep. Waking up, his eyes coming into focus on the muted watercolor of a panda bear, it takes him a second or two to figure out where he is. He puts on a nice shirt and drives to The Scripp's, a restaurant he and Jeanne went to for forty years. Often the waiters, many of them as old as Tate, leave a second menu and place-setting across from him, out of habit.

The last time he and Jeanne ate there, Jeanne, while finishing her salmon, bit into a staple, which she spat out and gave to him. Tate showed it to the waiter who returned with the chef. "I'm very sorry," the chef said. He was fat with a neat beard. Tate expected Jeanne to shrug him off. "I want you to go into the kitchen and bring me a piece of red-velvet cake," she said.

The chef turned to the waiter. "We don't have red-velvet cake," the waiter said. "We'd be happy to bring you anything from our dessert menu."

Jeanne looked at Tate and sighed and smiled. "I want you," she repeated, "to bring me a piece of red-velvet cake."

The waiter and the chef returned to the kitchen. Tate finished his dinner, ordered

more wine, and waited for Jeanne to make a move to leave. Probably they didn't talk about anything while they waited. Often they didn't. After twenty minutes, the waiter returned with a three-tiered slice of red-velvet cake with white frosting. Setting it in front of Jeanne, he said, "Please accept the restaurant's apologies." She stared at it for a second, then asked the waiter to put it in a box for her to take home. The waiter left with the cake. "What am I doing," she said.

At The Scripp's, Tate waits for his dinner while reading the newspaper. The waiters quietly move from table to table, talking to diners who look as if they've been herded up and taken somewhere against their will. An unopened menu sits across from him. Sometimes Jeanne would order her dinner, then realize she had chosen the wrong thing and go search for the waiter. Though it annoyed him then, he misses those few silent seconds after she handed the waiter the menu, when she'd either stand up or smile contentedly at him. He misses the anticipation and release of it.

Tonight, Tate orders the lamb chop and a glass of red wine. He drops his fork, then reaches over the table for the extra one. Though he never said it to Jeanne, he always assumed she'd be the one left alone after he died. Driving around town, reordering her days, making arrangements.



Callie begins visiting his condo three, sometimes four times a week. Her water glass from the previous visit is still in the sink when she returns. On the days she stops by, Tate makes sure not to wear shorts, because his chalky knees look sepulchral. Or cardigans: they make him look too brittle and kindly. He uses the bathroom before she arrives, and pulls a comb through his thinning, colorless hair. He imagines Jeanne watching and disapproving of these preparations, and he feels slightly foolish. But he isn't interested in examining his intentions. Being with Callie is too easy. He feels a vague air of aspiration whenever she comes over.

A man from the hospital calls one morning to ask how the volunteer is working out. Tate tells him he has no complaints. "None at all?" the man asks.

"Nope," Tate says.

"Would you like to think it over for a second?"

"Would you like me to have a complaint?"

The man lets out a brief wheeze. "Sir, this is a courtesy call to ensure our volunteers are adequately performing their duties."

At first Callie reminded Tate of Jeanne when Jeanne was younger, but he realizes that this is a false impression, invented perhaps to make him more comfortable around Callie. Jeanne at twenty-four was steady, forthright, aggressively unmysterious. Her only wile was the French accent, which diminished slightly over the years—or maybe it hadn't diminished; maybe he'd become accustomed to it. Sometimes he has the feeling that neither of them changed at all, they just became blindly accustomed to each other, satisfied with what they knew and what they didn't. And that Jeanne, even now, especially now, is as intimate and invisible as his nose.



One day Callie reads him a story, about a ship-full of soldiers returning home from battle. In the beginning, two soldiers are talking about a third, who has tuberculosis. She reads so beautifully clear and unwavering that he is soon too distracted from the story to figure out what is leading to what. At the end, one of the soldiers is wrapped in a sail cloth and dumped off the stern of the boat into the sea. Sharks circle him and take quick teasing bites. "I'm so dumb," she says when she closes the book. Her expression is grave, consoling, almost convincing. "I just remembered it being an amazing story, especially the end. I didn't even think about the subject matter."

Tate hasn't either. "It was lovely," he says.

"You seem so calm," she says. "I'm speaking from experience. You don't act like

anything's wrong."

"I've always been calm," he says. "And I've been feeling better. The treatment seems to be working."

She nods. "Everyone agrees it's an excellent hospital." She's still grave, though, the expression not yet ready to expire. "The reason I always wanted to go into nursing was because at hospitals something, you know, vital is always happening. I spend hours in the lobby of the oncology ward talking to patients. It probably sounds terrible."

"I don't like hospitals. My wife, Jeanne," he begins, then, seeing Callie brighten, stops himself. Something about the sudden lift of her eyebrows. "She didn't like them either."

"You're so unsentimental. My other friends are always wanting to confess things to me. I guess it's a side effect from their medication. Not that I mind. I like it actually. You, though, have an even temperament. Probably you should've been a judge, or an airline pilot."

What sort of things do her other friends confess to her? he wonders. Sometimes she'll draw her arms into her sleeves and cross them beneath her shirt. The first few times she did it, Tate asked if he should adjust the thermostat, but she swore she wasn't cold. Today, she wears a brown tank-top with a pair of bleach stains, symmetrical enough to look deliberate, below her breasts. She brings her arms into the tank-top and crosses them so the tan stubs of her shoulders occupy the arm holes. She is a loudly attractive girl.

"I was the vice president of a company that shipped fruit," he says.



The following day, she stops by unexpectedly. Tate has just returned from the hospital, and is getting ready to lie down for a nap. On the way to the living room, Callie pours herself some water, drinks it at the sink, then refills the glass. Tate waits in his reclining chair. His throat burns; his eyes feel like they're filming over. He blinks them back into focus.

On the way in, Callie ran into Mr. Stavros, who asked how she knew Tate. "I told him I was posing for a portrait you were painting. I don't think he believed me. He sort of mumbled something and walked away."

Stavros is one of Tate's neighbors. "He'll probably bring it up at the next condo association meeting," he says. The words come out like freezer-burned pellets. All he wants is to sleep. He eases the chair back a little and closes his eyes.

After awhile—he may have nodded off—Callie stands up, stretches, and says, "Tate? Would you mind if I took a bath?"

He finds a towel for her and sets it on top of the toilet seat. After turning on the water, she holds up a pair of ginseng bath sachets and asks, "Can I use these?" The sachets—Tate doesn't exactly know how they work, or if they're even intended to be used—were bought during Jeanne's redecorating. "Of course," he says. She starts to fiddle with her tank top. He leaves, closing the door behind him.

He busies himself in the kitchen, the room of the condo farthest from the bathroom. He washes some silverware. He stands in front of the toaster waiting for two slices of raisin bread to finish. After his injections, raisin bread is still the easiest thing to eat. But raisin bread toasts quickly: if he turns his back on it for a second it'll burn. Plus the kind he buys is swirled and topped with cinnamon, difficult under the bright orange coils to tell whether it's done toasting, or hyperilluminated, or—

Callie calls his name, twice. He raises his head from the toaster, to the wall-mounted abacus, which lists slightly, and waits. As he adjusts the abacus, she says, "Come here, Tate."

"You all right?" he calls.

"No. I'm bored. Come in here and talk to me."

At the bathroom door, he listens to the faint scuffling of bathwater. "Tate," she

says, "I've got an idea."

He remains still. Often he feels, when she is visiting, a great proprietary thrill of having this attractive girl in his house. The thought of her in his arms, though, of his old speckled hand on her skinny thigh, no matter how urgently summoned, defeats him. It is impossible. It's comical. It makes sense that he should become aware of his body now that it is failing, but not like this. Callie calls his name again; he stands quietly at the door. He isn't about to open it.

He goes into his bedroom and lies down. Eyes closed, he imagines being dropped into a warm patch in the center of the ocean. He sinks slowly, pulled gently down into blackening water. Sealife swims out of his way below, fills the vacant trail he leaves above. By the time he lands on the ocean floor he is asleep.

He wakes up to a darkened room, his head hot on his pillow, and Callie, apparently, is gone.



Stavros smokes a black cigarette by the front door of his condo when Tate returns from dinner. Thickset and facetious, he lives four units down, a brass knocker incised with his last name on the front door. "Guess who I ran into the other day," he says.

"I know, I heard," Tate says, reaching into his pocket for his house key. "She's a volunteer from the hospital."

He's disappointed by how quickly he surrenders this to Stavros, who exhales incredulously. Tate hasn't told his neighbors he's sick but somehow, all at once, they found out. Their persistence, their hungry concern: his neighbors are like birds.

"She's sharp," Stavros says. "I bet she makes very interesting conversation."

"She wants to be a writer."

Stavros laughs. Just his shoulders shake. "It will never happen," he says. "She's too concerned with the effect she is having to be a writer. But I'm sure she'll make stories everywhere she goes."

"What do you know. You've barely spoken to her."

"I watch her get out of her car," Stavros says. "Maybe she wants to make a story with you."

Tate continues on to his condo. The cigarette smoke, mixed with the taste of his dinner, leaves him nauseous. "You don't look so good," Stavros calls. "Are you feeling okay?"

Inside, Tate washes his face at the bathroom mirror. Stavros is right: his face looks ransacked, topped by a few perfunctory wisps of hair. He feels as if he's being prepared; in a few weeks he'll be perfectly bald. Without hair, he can't look at his reflection without thinking: skull.

Jeanne started wearing a wig before beginning chemotherapy. It matched her dyed auburn hair so well that for days Tate didn't know she wore it, until one late night he saw it sitting on the floor next to her nightstand. How diffidently she died! She walked around the condo watering jade plants before she went to the hospital the final time. When people asked how she was feeling, she'd say, "Fine. You?" Her only indulgence was insisting on a piece of red-velvet cake, which sat three days in the refrigerator before Tate threw it away. Her wig is still in their bedroom closet, pinned to a faceless styrofoam head.



Over the next few weeks, the nausea returns and he notices he's losing weight. One afternoon, after waking up from a nap with a tearing sensation in his abdomen, he goes into the bathroom and coughs up a warm clot of blood, which lands below the rim of the sink, trembles, and releases a single pinkish strand of fluid.

In the lobby of the oncology ward, Tate flips through a business magazine, stopping on an article about a man who retired from a law firm, invested wisely, and became a

famous yachtsman. He remembers what Callie said about hanging out in the oncology ward, and he looks around for her: twenty or so men and women, most of them older than him and staring at a television with its sound off. Callie hasn't been to the condo in more than a month, since the day of her bath. He left a message at her house and thought about calling the hospital but he didn't want to get her in trouble. He decided that his hesitancy to go into the bathroom reflected poorly on him, that his prudishness revealed his shameful intentions. Either that, or she's embarrassed she'd asked.

The lobby smells like carpet, coffee, hairspray. His arms are numb; he can taste his fillings. He wants to lay his head in the lap of the old woman next to him. She is gripping a metal walker with one hand and digging into her hive-shaped pocketbook with the other. Stuck to the crossbar of the walker is a rectangular address label. He looks down at his own lap and sees that he's squeezing the magazine so hard he's crumpled a picture of the famous yachtsman.

The spiky-haired doctor recommends a CT scan. In the tomography room a nurse unattaches the catheter from Tate's chest. He lies on a skinny vinyl table and is inserted into the scanner with his head sticking out. Orange dye drips slowly from a bottom-heavy bag. From behind him the nurse says, "Breathe deep. Okay don't breathe." Soon he feels a lukewarm surge beginning in his forehead and ending in his lap, and he's sure he's peed himself. He tries to remember what pants he has on. The nurse says, "You might be feeling something warm right now. It's the contrast moving through."

A week later, he sits on an examination table above which hangs a bumper sticker that says ♥ *Your Phlebotomist*. The doctor comes in and looks at Tate, sits down, and looks at him again. He has a clipped smudge of a mustache. "It's such a stubborn disease," he says. "We'll want to modify our approach."

The cancer has spread to Tate's lymph nodes, which are important, the doctor reminds him, to his immune system. By *modify our approach* the doctor means Tate coming to the hospital early the next morning to have his lymph nodes and a larger section of his colon removed through his abdomen. He tells Tate not to eat anything for sixteen hours before the surgery. He looks at his watch. "That gives you about seven minutes to run to the snack machine for a Snicker's." Tate hates the man for saying *Snicker's*. He stays where he is while the doctor nods some more. "From here it gets more difficult," the man says. "You probably remember from your wife." He peeks down at his notes. "Jeanne's." He peeks again. "Colon cancer."



Back at his condo he tries to think of someone to call. Jeanne's brother and his family live abroad. Tate can never figure out the country codes so he rarely talks to them anymore. He has a few friends in town, but doesn't feel like burdening them with the news. He phones Callie. He imagines the phone ringing next to a bundle of postcards atop an oversized wooden spool. When her answering machine picks up, he replaces the receiver.

He decides to clean out the refrigerator. He dumps a half-gallon of milk down the sink, throws away expired salad dressing and cheese. In the far back corner of the refrigerator, hidden behind a can of sweet corn, is a jar of Jeanne's favorite brown mustard. Tate pulls it out and examined the peeling label flecked with pepper: half-empty, a year past its expiration date, turning darker brown near the top of the jar. That it so outlasted Jeanne makes the mustard seem monumental, full of importance. He throws it and the can of sweet corn in the garbage. He's neither hopeful or hopeless, but knowing that none of the condiments will be lingering around the refrigerator if something happens, waiting for him to return home, heartens him a little.

Later, the doorbell rings. Tate looks through the peephole at Callie, who removes her sunglasses and sort of purses her lips. In her arms is a brown shopping bag. Tate opens the door and she smiles, then walks past him into the kitchen. "It smells like

something in here," she says.

Tate opens a window and sits in the recliner while Callie gets something to drink. He can see one bare foot, capped by the silver anklet. He wonders how casually he'd have to say, "So where have you been?" for it not to sound like a reprimand. She comes into the living room holding two glasses of pink liquid.

"Grenadine and cheap beer," she says, handing him a glass. "It tastes like soda."

Tate waits for the foam to recede before sipping it. It indeed tastes like soda, cold and cloying. He feels it traveling as a lump down his esophagus. Callie finishes hers, and makes a sour face. Her hair is fastened limply behind her head, and she looks paler, more tentative. She worries the anklet by shaking her foot around. It takes Tate a few minutes to realize she's nervous.

"It's good," he says. "I'm glad you came. I was at the hospital today."

"I guess that's why I'm here then," she says.

When Tate finishes his drink, Callie goes into the kitchen and makes another. She invites Tate to sit on the couch and rests her feet on his knee. Her legs aren't heavy. She confesses that, except for Tate, she's tired of all her friends. They just want to whine about how much they regret this and that. She's sick of it. They're so *uninteresting*. Clearly, *uninteresting*, in her opinion, is the worst thing someone can be. Her feet move around atop his knees randomly. She's considering quitting the hospital, but she wants to sleep with a doctor first, ideally a surgeon. Surgeons, she hears, are thorough. Surgeons have very clever hands. Tate studies a pair of silk fans clipped to the opposite wall, Jeanne's final flourish. He feels as if he's in a museum, eavesdropping on someone else's conversation. His leg has fallen asleep. "It's your turn to tell me a secret," Callie says.

Tate carefully sets his glass on the tea table, fitting it atop the wet ring it left. He says, "An old, old friend of Jeanne's had discouraged Jeanne from marrying me. She used to send Jeanne birthday cards and Christmas cards, which I'd open and black out a few words from their greeting. Like she'd write *Wishing you all the best these holidays. I sure would hate to still be living up north, wouldn't you!* And I'd black out the words to read *The holidays sure do hate to still be living you!* or something mean-spirited, and then mail the card back to her. After awhile they stopped coming."

Callie's expression confirms that this is a good, that is, an interesting-enough, secret. "Didn't they ever talk on the phone?" she asks. "I mean, even if Jeanne didn't know, I'm sure she *knew*. You know?"

"No," Tate says. "I'm pretty sure she didn't know."

Out the back window, he sees that the patio light has turned on: the sun is setting.

"What is this called again?" he asks, pointing to the empty glass.

"A Monaco. They drink them in Prague!"

She returns to the kitchen. Tate digs his fingers into the sofa's upholstery. He's angry with himself. There was no reason to mention the cards, to casually bring them up so as not to appear secret-less or uninteresting, which he supposes he is.

She returns with a glass in each hand. She asks, "Would you go without bathing for six months in exchange for five-hundred thousand dollars?"

"Who's going to pay that much for me not to bathe?"

"Don't worry about that," she says. "The questions are supposed to make you think about how you live, what's important to you. Okay, here's another: would you live in perfect happiness for a year if at the end you wouldn't remember any of it? Why, or why not?"

"Sure," he says. "Starting right now."

"Why, or why not?"

He finishes his drink. Callie withdraws her legs and turns her head, poised to accept whatever Tate wants to unload on her. She has extremely sympathetic eyebrows. That her other friends spend their time confessing and regretting things to her doesn't surprise him. What does she expect? She's probably the only person they were moved to compose themselves around. Tonight, her eagerness seems insincere to Tate. Like

earlier in the waiting room, he has the impulse to lean over, lay his head in her lap, and fall asleep. He supposes that if he asked, she'd allow him to, which is partially why he doesn't ask.

After a few minutes, she gets up from the couch and says, "Where are your records, Tate?"

He sits forward. "You mean pictures?"

"Albums. Record albums."

"Photo albums?"

"I think we're a little drunk. I see a record player but no records."

"Our bedroom closet," Tate says.

Callie returns with a stack of records and sets them in front of the record player. On hands and knees, she fiddles with the record player's lid and soon a woman is singing in French over the speakers. "Edith Piaf, Charles Aznavour, Jacques Brel. These are amazing," she says. "Do you speak French?"

"They belonged to Jeanne. You can have them."

She says she couldn't possibly take them. It was a casual offer, but the more reluctant she acts, the more vigorously he insists. They're just records sitting in a closet. He isn't sentimental about them, he doesn't even speak French. He'd rather someone have the records who will listen to them. Callie gives in and thanks him. They dance.

Tate's hand rests lightly on her hip. She feels small at the waist, and smells like gum though he doesn't notice her chewing any. The catheter presses against his chest, pinching him. Worrying about it, he almost trips over Callie's feet, but she is a graceful dancer. Her eyes are closed. Tate knows that whatever happens tonight will be a lot like this dance: difficult for him, easy for her. This, he decides, is fine.

"Aren't I a good dancer?" she says when the song ends, looking up at him. Her irises are the depthless blue of oceans in an atlas. He agrees that she is.

"Lessons," she says. She kneels down by the record player and finds another forty-five she's excited about. Tate, waiting for her to finish, can't decide what to do with his hands. "I've got an idea," she says. "I'll be right back."

A somber-sounding ballad plays, and Tate doesn't understand a word. He used to come home from work to find Jeanne with a glass of wine in the recliner, listening to her records. The wine and the music left her meek and maudlin for the rest of the evening. Tate never asked her what the songs were about; she never told him. It was a pleasant mystery. Like the two-hour walks she took after dinner, or when she spoke French in her sleep. He knew so much and so little about her.

Just as he's about to stop the record, Callie walks in wearing a charm necklace and Jeanne's auburn wig. It sits high on her head, over her hair, which is tucked beneath it. She has a long neck and, in the wig, looks like some sort of grandmother robin. It makes Tate instantly and irrationally angry. She smiles at him. "Shall we dance?"

"First why don't you take that off?"

"Hey, why don't we pretend we're on a ship crossing the Atlantic? Like I'm the ladies auxiliary seeing you off to war. We've got one night until we hit port."

"That's a bit too close to the truth. Right now, I'd really like you to take the wig off."

She steps closer to him, lifting her skinny arms to dance. "Tonight we dance, tomorrow it's *au revoir*."

He expected Callie would do something irresponsible, he was hoping for it, actually. He was prepared to give in to whatever reckless idea she had. But not this. Not crossing the Atlantic and seeing him off to war in Jeanne's wig. "Here," he says. He grabs the wig and yanks harder than he intends. He expects to casually pull it off and toss it into the bedroom. Instead the wig shifts only slightly and Callie's neck lurches. "That hurts," she says, gripping and pushing away Tate's arm. "Let go. You're hurting me."

He doesn't let go. Instead he pulls harder, reasoning that once he frees the wig, she'll see why he grabbed it, and understand. He isn't able to. She squirms free and

collapses on the couch, out of breath, beginning to cry. The wig has shifted sideways enough for Tate to see the pearl-white heads of the pins holding it in place. The record ends and the needle ticks against the label before it lifts and resets. "That was not deliberate," he says.

"What's wrong then? Why did you grab me?" She sits up, pulls the pins out of the wig carefully, one by one, and sets them and the wig next to her. Her hair gleams in contrast, as if she pulled off a scab. "What's wrong?" she repeats.

That she has no idea she's done anything inappropriate—looking around the bedroom closet for something to put on, settling on Jeanne's wig—seems to Tate unforgivably arrogant. "I'm sick," he says. "No matter how much I want to, I'm not getting better."

She stands up and gathers the empty glasses from the tea table.

"You don't have to do that," he says.

He follows her into the kitchen, where she tucks the half-empty grenadine bottle into the shopping bag among beer cans. She won't look at him. "We were having fun," she tells the bag.

"Take the records," Tate says. He sees no good way to stop her from leaving, but thinks he can delay her a little longer. "Take whatever looks interesting."

To his surprise Callie finds another shopping bag, returns to the living room, and fills it with records. It takes about two minutes. "Your nose is bleeding," she says on the way out. The usual concern in her voice is missing. If it had been there, he wouldn't have recognized it, but its absence is far easier to identify. From the kitchen window he watches her get into her black car and drive away.

In the living room he holds a wet paper towel to his nose. With his head back he can see the top bookshelf arrayed with knickknacks: a pair of Confucius figurines, saki cups around a tiny decanter, a Zen waterfall that, when plugged in, makes serene cascading noises. Jeanne, Jeanne, Jeanne. The blood pools along his palate. The record continues to play.

When the bleeding stops, Tate returns the wig to the closet. It is stored on a styro-foam head, a bare white egg on a stand, not a head at all really, something designed with a single purpose in mind. Tate pins the wig to it, positioning the wig with the label toward the back. It makes the egg more head-like. "Placeholder," he says to the egg.

He isn't tired so he goes into the living room to listen to Jeanne's records, forgetting that Callie has left with them. There is just the forty-five on the turntable, which ends and resets every few minutes. He is thinking about Callie's question: a year of perfect happiness after which he wouldn't remember anything. The more he listens to the record, the more he likes the notion of a year of perfect happiness forgotten. Not the anticipation of one to come, but the idea that one might have existed in his past. *A year of perfect happiness*, just the sound of it, a single year locked away from the years before and the years after it, happiness unburdened by nostalgia, perfect....

In the morning, the record is still playing. Tate packs a small suitcase, locks the door to his condo, and drives himself to the hospital. ▣