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DOT AND CHARLIE

*(A Comedy About
Love, Sexism, and Infidelity)*

Victoria Bennett

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DOT AND CHARLIE (A COMEDY ABOUT LOVE, SEXISM, AND INFIDELITY)

(Dot)

Writing Exercise 10:

Spring rain falls. Just, unjust, it still falls as if it has no qualities. It does not fall yet, only it will, before the night.

The beach in the Caribbean is the same as it was last year, for all I know. It can't be, of course, not exactly, and yet for the spring rain on the beach, I have no sympathy this year. Perhaps, just maybe, I had more last year.

I am the same, I think, except that I feel less, or change emotions more slowly, like a fall that doesn't seem to come after a long, hot summer. It will be summer again, too soon, and I won't be able to sleep for the heat.

I was in love, once. No, more than once, if we count the times I was deluded, bewitched, deceived, made a fool of. But recently, I was in love. And then, he didn't care if I lived or died, and I lost interest—in myself.

As they say, one can refine too much upon small circumstances, or put all the eggs in one basket, the first a case of too intense a voyeurism, the second a plain foolish impracticality. I accuse myself of both, with him. A man's face does not reveal anything like a soul, one can put anything behind the face and really believe in it, as long as he does not contradict it, with or without knowing. And one man can barely stand up to and weather all the demands of one's own seasons. Yet none of them, probably, would find these things adequate reasons for either too skeptical a treatment or multiple lovers. They are hard to please.

(Charlie)

Dolly is being arbitrary and perverse. I'm a good man, I'm good to her, she has nothing to complain of. I don't cheat, or at least I haven't since we—since it got serious. I could, I guess, marry her, if that's what she wants, but in my experience it's usually the woman who manages to bring the subject up first, even if the man is the one who has to step up.

So what's she doing now? She was courting me like crazy a year ago, looked good, or at least better—well, I know how I look, I'm not that picky, but now—well now she's getting fat again, not taking as much care of her appearance, sitting around sighing a lot.

I ask her to go for a walk, and she acts as if she's tolerating me, or worse, as if I'd drawn out my dick in public and embarrassed her. She should be glad I want to walk with her, it's not every man who would put up with such back-and-forth behavior. And why should I call her Dorothy now, or Dot? It's not as if they're the same, and Dolly sounds friendlier, it's how I knew her first. I never banked on a change of personality.

Yeah, and she was really weird around the time of that sprained ankle. The more reassuring I was, the more she seemed put off. You'd think she'd broken her back, or something. I guess I'm not that demonstrative a guy. I thought at first she was just missing her book club friends, but I even drove her to that, helped her in and out, and tolerated, yeah *I* tolerated that stuff myself, for what seemed like hours on end. I like books, in their place, but there were no other guys there, and those women most of them kept giggling and looking over at me, as if I had a harem or something. The others glared as if I had personally offended them just by existing. I wonder what she said to them.

(Dot)

Old Lovers

I really don't think we should be having
This much alcohol,
I don't think my sugar
Can take it.
What sugar? You're not diabetic.
I will be if I keep this up.
Come on, relax
Have a little fun
Life was made for more than this worrying.
Life only lasts
As long as you take care of it.
That's absurd,
You can take care of it all you like
And if it's your time, you're gone.
You're gone faster if you keep drinking
And smoking like a twenty-year-old.
Now with the smoking!
How many unalloyed pleasures
Do I have left?
You don't enjoy smoking
It's just a habit.
What makes you think you know
What I enjoy?
Are you serious?
Never more so.
Well, if that's the way you feel—
Look, don't get all
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf-y on me,
Okay?
I just don't think you know me
As well as you think.
Not only do I know my sugar count,
I know your own,
And I know your cholesterol
And your blood pressure
And all the rest of that stuff.
I'm not talking about "that stuff"
I'm talking about me, what I like.
You like what you shouldn't
And don't like what you ought to.

I don't like measuring my days out
In calories and heartbeats—
Then you'll have fewer days.
The better not to be nudged.
This is getting us nowhere.
Why don't we just take it easy for once?
But what else do we ever discuss?
My health, your health, doctor's visits, diet plans
Why don't we just cut loose tonight?
Because we both know better and because
Tomorrow we each have somewhere else to be.
You're right, I don't know why I give a shit
Let's call it a night.

We really don't drink that much, I guess, but I wanted to write a poem for the upcoming week at my book club. Everyone is bringing something, and a dialogue seemed the most natural thing to do. I hope they'll realize that the two voices come together in the three lines from "Why don't we" to "diet plans." I'm a bit embarrassed about explaining things like that, I feel like Fay or one of them will tell me I did it wrong.

Charlie, of course, keeps creeping around while I'm writing, first as if he's stepping on eggs, which annoys me, and then as if he's curious. I don't feel comfortable letting him read what I've written. It seems easier with my fellow book club members.

He still hasn't apologized for being so cavalier about the time I was incapacitated. Not that he didn't help, but he kept being really cheerful, as if I were making a fuss about nothing, and after the first two weeks, he kept telling me to put some weight on it and see how it felt. I could imagine how it would feel, I didn't have to put weight on it.

That's men, though. They expect you to tough everything out, just because they aren't good at expressing emotions.

He made me feel really sad, but it started me keeping a journal again, and trying to write. My first effort, about the beach and the rain, was “evocative,” as Mrs. Chandler used to say in 9th grade. I always wondered if she said that either to cover her own uncertainty or to let people down easily, but now I think I know what she meant: it goes somewhere, just not far enough. In my case, it’s emotionally evocative, not picture-wise. But I don’t know if I’m capable of the world’s great dramas, the death scenes and all that. I’m really rather ordinary, more or less. Death is, of course, the most ordinary thing of all; or birth, not to be too gloomy.

But if I wrote about Charlie’s death, or even mine, and he found out about it, he might get really angry or hurt, or think that I was wanting to get rid of him. Why does everything have to be so complicated?

(Charlie)

I think I've figured out what that gaggle of geese was cackling about the last time I was there with Dolly. She's got a notebook, and she keeps writing things in it, and looking nervous when I come around. It's pretty obvious that it has something to do with me. Some writing exercise from before she sprained her ankle, like "Describe your significant other"—as they say now—"on a typical day" or something like that, and she's afraid to let me see.

Well, I don't give a damn what she says, I know I've done right by her, and she can put that in her pipe and smoke it. Maybe I made a mistake, letting her move in with me so soon after we met, only six months, really, but she had that look in her eye, and she really didn't look bad then.

She doesn't *really* look bad now, only she says she's going on a diet again. Maybe everyone in her hen-party is. I say, to myself at least, I'll believe it when I see it. Not that I haven't seen her slimmer, but I've had dealings with plump women before—they find it harder to go back in time than I do. Drinking, smoking, I'm not deeply attached to either one, though I do enjoy them a bit now and then. But I have the same physique I had twenty years ago, mostly anyway. Eating isn't my problem.

They do say, the doctors, that it isn't really a woman's fault, that biology is against women. If so, I'm glad I'm a man. Don't have to deal with all those questions about inequality, for one thing. Man started out in advance, and even though we have to be equal now, there's nothing like having a head start. Not way back in prehistoric times, maybe, but as far back as I can remember, men were on top. Which brings up another

thing. She keeps quoting the *Kama Sutra* to me, for one thing, about how fat women shouldn't have to be on top. Now, I'm all for a little extra exercise sometimes, but it's not fair never to be able to look at her above me, and watch her move. She's still not bad-looking. Who cares if it ends up the right way every time, as long as you have fun? Or at least, since women have a harder time coming than men, maybe they should, just maybe, expect a little less in the way of miracles, and go along for the ride. Hell, I don't always, I mean I pretend that I do, because she might think it's weird for a man not to, or that I didn't still find her attractive, or something, but let's face it, we're both over fifty and neither of us is a marathon runner.

(Evy)

There's Dad, sitting looking pissed off again. She can't be very good for him, to leave him sitting around brooding all the time. And I can't broach the topic in depth of how he's getting along, because he responds like a wounded bear. A bear with his foot in a trap, that's him. Only he represses his roar, and sits around half the time looking as if he might explode. Mom was no saint, either. She nagged him all the time, from the time I was little until the day she died. It was just our good luck that he had the money to get us some kind of household help, if you can call Mrs. Mooney "help." For ages, I thought he might fall for her, but he surprised us all when he let her go after Tommy's high school graduation; said he could do for himself now. If letting Dolly move in with him is his idea of doing for himself, no wonder he has problems.

Now he sees me, he's smiling. He has a nice smile. Nice, clean white teeth, and he always seems so genuine. I think he's a really honest man, he just doesn't bother smiling if he doesn't feel like it.

(Charlie)

Evy. My little girl. I wonder if the baby will be a girl too, or a little boy. God forgive second thoughts, but I wonder what trouble she's here to stir up. Women. Too bad they can't just haul off and punch each other the way men do when they want to get something out of their system. Of course, these days everybody gets dragged in by the police for doing stuff like that, no more just boys-will-be-boys. Dolly says these times that are coming are going to be more respectful of the individual, but I say, the more individuals there are, the less respect there is to go around, and the population is growing for sure. Why look over in China, they execute businessmen for putting out toxic products. Not that I think they shouldn't be punished, but if they didn't know ahead of time, well—they must have had some safety protocols in place. Everything's imported from there now anyway, and they have to be careful what they sell to us—we catch them nearly every time, or at least I guess we do. Somebody does, anyway.

Evy. No, she's smiling, looks happy, I guess she and Donald are doing okay. Maybe it's just a visit today. I wish Tom would get off his butt and find a girl, a nice girl this time, someone with some of the sense his sister has. Nobody can deny that Evy's a sharp one, right on the ball. I think I'm as eager for that first grandchild as Evy herself.

(Dot)

Oh, God, here's Evy and me with my hair still in curlers and the dishes not done. And I can't very well say that it was Charlie's turn for the dishes this time, even though it was. She seems to like to catch me at fault. It's that coolly appraising glance she always gives me. I used just those words to Charlie, "coolly appraising," and he said that I'd been reading too many books, and that Evy looks at the whole world like that, "straight as an arrow," he said, like he was proud of her for it. And also from *The Book of Charlie* is the claim that Evy "doesn't dislike you, she just doesn't know what she wants—whereas I do," and then he pats or squeezes my leg. I still haven't figured out if that's more of a compliment or an insult. If he means it just physically, then it's kind of lewd, but I'm not really a prude; or does he mean he really wants me? We've discussed in the book club before the bifurcation of womanhood into sexually available and attractive models and mother/sister/daughter models in traditional fiction, as to whether male authors model their preferred heroines in a love relationship after the one or the other. I got lost after what seemed to me Isabel's sensible point, that if men were modeling the sexually available heroine after a mother/sister/daughter model, that there was either something incestuous about their preference of a heroine, or else the bifurcation didn't hold true and there was interpenetration of influences (and of course, the feminists jumped on the root word "penetration"). I thought I was a feminist until I ran into those gals. But maybe some of them are gay, I think one of them is for sure. That's why I was afraid to say that in sexual terms, at least, women could also penetrate women, and therefore the metaphor

was acceptable. I didn't want to seem to be telling her her business. And if physically, why not mentally?

There are times when the dishes are sitting around and Charlie hasn't done them and I feel guilty about it (especially if anybody else sees them), then he says, quite gently for a man, "You don't always have to do the dishes." He almost seems more liberated than I feel, sometimes. I just wish Evy would like me for who I really am—is that too much to ask? She seems to be making a record of my faults, and that's not fair.

(Tom)

Damn, there's Evy's car. Dad and Evy, Dad and Evy. When is that great cow going to pop that baby out and make herself something to do so that she's not constantly hounding Dad about something and making it impossible for the rest of us to get along with him? There he was, sitting outside just enjoying the weather out on the porch, and Evy comes flying by. Too late for me to ask him to go to the game with me now, I guess, she'll stay the whole afternoon, and then he'll feel like he has to spend some time with Dolly to make up for Evy—should I really call Dolly "Dot" like she said? Dad didn't seem to like it much, but I guess there could be a whole lot of history I don't know about behind that sour expression he had on his face when she said it. If he doesn't want her to get in tight with his family, then he shouldn't have had her to move in. Oh, well, another time. I guess I can get Rob to go to the game. It's just a shame I don't get to see the old man more often.

(Charlie, Evy)

“Was that Tom’s car I just saw? No, over there, just going around the corner. It’s backing up.”

“I really don’t know, Dad, I didn’t see it. Probably not. Most Saturday afternoons, he’s with his pals at the bar.”

“Now Evy, Tom isn’t—Tom doesn’t—that is, he only spends the same amount of time in a bar that most men do with their friends.”

“Did I say anything, Dad? I just said—“

“It was the tone of your voice, so disapproving. You’ve got to watch that with kids, Evy. Kids are very sensitive, they pick up on tone of voice quick. They get really insecure if they think you’re mad at them all the time.”

“*Tom?* Insecure?”

“Not Tom, Evy. You. You were always jumping at your own shadow when you were a kid. Your mother did her best, but she rode you quite a bit, God love her.”

“*Me?* What about you? She made your life a misery. I just ignored her after a while. She never really punished me much, anyway. Just nagged.”

“I don’t mean when you were a teenager. I mean when you were a kid, a little kid. You chewed your nails, and fidgeted, and cried easily. I guess you just grew a thicker skin as a teenager.”

“It’s a good thing I did, Dad. By the way, how are you and Dolly doing? Or Dorothy, Dot, whatever she calls herself. Still getting along okay?”

“You aren’t subtle, are you, Evy?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I just mean, anything new cropping up for you two? A vacation, new furniture, anything at all? You never even told me you two had met until I came by one day and found you getting packed for a cruise to the Caribbean with a strange woman, and—“

“Are you ever going to let me forget that you felt left out? Evy, I’m an adult, your mother’s gone; like I told you at the time, Dolly and I met at a church social where we neither of us belonged, and it brought us together. People find odd things in common, my dear, and then they find more, and sometimes even the ways they’re different are reasons to rejoice. Speaking of which, why can’t you be happy for me? I’m happy, that should be enough for you.”

“First of all, Dad, most of the time when I stop by, you don’t look happy, you look really grumpy. If I say anything to you, you get grumpier still, like now. Second of all, where do you see this going? You can’t just live together forever. Is the church ever going to see you two again?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?”

“I know what it sounds like: one of two things. Either you’re trying to get me back into a system I was never really comfortable with, or else you’re trying to marry me off. I thought you didn’t like Dolly.”

“Is that her name now, Dolly? It’s not that I don’t like her, Dad, I just wonder if you let her walk all over you when she moved in. Maybe it was too fast. And I’m not trying to get you to marry her, I just thought the two of you might benefit from church, being around other people.”

“We see other people, Evy. We have a few friends here among the neighbors, people you mostly know, and we play cards with the Devlins a couple of times a week. Church isn’t our kind of place.”

“Okay, Dad, okay.”

“Stop sighing. Why do women have to sigh at me all the time?”

“Does *she* sigh?”

“No, Evy, I’m not going to let you pick a fight with Dolly through me. You had best worry about that baby that’s coming. You’re going to be very busy quite soon.”

“Not permanently, Dad. Donald said after we get a nanny that he could still use me at the agency.”

“But not for about a year, surely.”

“People take vacations at all times of year, Dad, as you should know. Maybe next time you go somewhere, you’ll use our agency instead of some fly-by-night—“

“Evy, you’re like a broken record sometimes. We got a fair package deal, and we didn’t get stiffed anywhere, except possibly in the islands themselves, and that wasn’t the travel agency’s responsibility.”

“But Dad, Donald would have given you a cheaper rate.”

“Life isn’t always about getting a cheaper rate.”

“Is it about skulking around and hiding from your family?”

“Sometimes, my dear, it’s about adventure, and doing things on the spur of the moment, and not announcing everything to everybody because it’s fun to have a secret. Don’t you and Donald have any secrets? I think you must; you’re married, you seem to get along okay—“

“I would never have a secret from Donald!”

“That’s not what I meant, Evy, I meant the two of you, secrets from other people. But you know what? If you were really honest with yourself, you might find you *did* have a secret or two from Donald. Oh, maybe nothing big, but—“

“If you’re going to be spiteful, Dad, I’ll just go. Give me a call when you’re in a better mood.”

(Charlie)

Quick, offended, peck on the cheek, and so she goes. I won't get a chance to call her before she comes over again. And wave goodbye to her and that's it for another visit. Maybe a kid or two will wear her rough edges down a bit.

(Jeffrey)

Old shits. Why'd they have to leave me with these old shits? I can take care of myself. Look at him looking at her bum. Wonder if that's how he does her. Disgusting. Look how flabby she is, and he looks like a scarecrow or like a really old Davy Dead. Wonder what Davy Dead will look like when he's old. Probably real phat. At least he'll still have his hair, I bet.

(Dot, on telephone to Pam)

"Yes, yes, okay. No, he's more of a problem to himself that he is to me and Charlie. Sits with earphones in most of the time, scowling. Doesn't like to take them out even when he eats, just sits nodding in time, and eating like he really is starved and doesn't care what it is. No, I've never been married, I don't have kids. I've heard before that teenagers eat a lot. No, of course you shouldn't pay us, it's our pleasure, I just wish I could feel that Jeffrey enjoyed being here. Well, we are a little old to be good company for him, I'm afraid, and our tv doesn't have any video games or modern things on it, it's just a new tv. Charlie and I don't even know what to do with half of the options on our remote. I know, but a little bit of video play a day wouldn't hurt him. I just hate to see him so, you know, despondent. He's a really nice-looking boy when he's not frowning. No girlfriend yet? Yes, okay, no, I understand. I'll talk to you later then, Pam. Tell Robbie I said 'Hello.' Bye-bye."

(Jeffrey, Charlie, Dot)

"Huh? Couldn't hear you." He gestures toward the tentacles attached to his head. I'd like to jerk him out of that chair and give him what-for.

"I said, it's a nice day and we're going to the park. Grab your stuff and get your butt in gear."

"Charlie!"

"I can stay here. I'm fine. Promise I won't touch a thing, man."

"That's not an option. We're responsible for you today, so you're coming with us. The john's available right now if you need to go before we leave."

"It'll be fine, honey, Charlie's just in a funny mood—" Smack! on my hand—"Don't touch the food, Charlie, I'm trying to pack it up. If you eat now you won't be hungry later."

"Wanna bet? I could eat a horse right now. I hope those bizarre people from down the street won't be near the picnic tables today."

"Which ones?"

"The tables or the people?"

"Well—the people, I guess. We mostly find a space at the same tables all the time."

"Man, do I have to go? Those kids there are lame, and like, all I want to do is play my stuff. I'm not hungry."

"You can play your stuff anywhere. If you're not hungry, don't eat." I glare at him. He stares back, mutinous, then looks away and shrugs. Good. Still got it. It's been a

long time since Tom was a teenager, but I guess he and Jeffrey are enough alike that—oh, God, no! "What are you packing that thing for?" She's got my doughnut in her hand.

"So that you can sit comfortably, Charlie. Hemorrhoids are no laughing matter."

Did he hear that? Impossible to tell. Is that a grin? Can't see, he's got his back to me. Well, his earphones were in that time. Maybe not.

"What are you whispering about?"

"I said, please keep your trap shut about stuff like that in front of him. He's disrespectful enough as it is. Anyway, I don't need the doughnut anymore since I was treated. Put it away!"

"Okay, okay. Why is it such a struggle to get you two out for a nice day? The spring isn't going to last forever. And Charlie, he's not really disrespectful, it's just—"

"Yes, he is. Doesn't even try to hold a polite conversation with us, just tunes us out."

"But we're really more comfortable that way, my dear. Each of us doing what we really want to do instead of trying to pretend. How would you feel if you had to entertain him all day? And whatever does he have to talk to us about? We're so far apart in age."

"Yeah, well, maybe not making the effort, on both sides, is what makes so many of them go around shooting people and tearing up stuff. It makes me glad I don't own a gun when I see him look at me that way sometimes."

"What way do you mean? He's just doing what they all do; I'm sure if we had had We-phones or I-pods or whatever they're called, we would have done the same things."

"It's anti-social."

"Teenagers, according to practically everyone I know, are like that. They don't usually enjoy being with older people. Give him a few years."

"What makes you think you know so much? I brought up two kids, and both of them were taught to be polite to their elders."

Door slams. Where is that kid--? In the car? "Dolly, did you tell Jeffrey we were taking the car?"

"No, why should I? We always walk to the park."

"Damn kid's sitting in the back seat, waiting for us. Using good gas to go two blocks? Who's the old man, me or him?"

"Well, maybe we should use the car today, you know how self-conscious teenagers are about being seen not at their best."

"What's his best, then?"

"Take it from me, dearie, his best doesn't include us, at least not in his view."

Why is she laughing so riotously? It isn't all that funny. "How do you know? Who told you these things? And anyway, why do you think he's typical?"

"His mother. Remember Pam? She's told me about her troubles with him. And I can remember being a teenager myself, although it seems you can't. Cast your mind back, way back—"

"Okay, don't overdo it."

"—to a simpler time, when you were sent to stay with Mr. and Mrs.—what was their name?—Spolone?"

"No, there was a reason for my reluctance; as I told you, old Spolone was a gangster, or as near to one as makes no difference. When I annoyed him, he chased me around the yard with the garden hoe, or his cane, or some other piece of equipment. Have you seen me chase Jeffrey?"

"No, and I don't want to, so simmer down. Here, here's the basket, take it and put it in the trunk. We can easily take the car just this once, and if we park at the upper end, it won't matter that our parking sticker's expired."

"It's farther to walk from the upper end."

"You're the one who was so eager to carry the basket for two blocks. C'mon, show up the young sprout."

"If the young sprout had any manners, he'd be carrying the basket."

"That's better. You look so much sexier when you smile."

"Don't let your knight in shining armor hear you say that, he'd really get a horse's laugh."

"You know who my knight in shining armor is. Just carry the basket out. I'll be there as soon as I get my sweater."

"Grab my hat, will you?"

"Which hat? Oh, not that ratty old white thing, you don't mean that?"

"Yes, I mean that. It's still in very good shape, thank you."

"Well, you *must* be trying to give the kid a laugh, that's all I can say. Go on, go on, I'll bring it. Don't drop the basket!"

Don't drop the basket. Have I ever dropped the basket?

(Dot)

No, it's not that I don't feel as much as before, as last year even. It's that I feel more, and have less ability to express it. Charlie seems fine, and I guess I'm not mad at him anymore. He just doesn't understand, probably, about some things I feel, and there's no point in getting into a long-winded, never-ending argument with him, the way I used to do with guys when I was younger. At the time, it seemed that if I didn't resolve the issue, I was setting myself up for disappointment. Then, I ended up getting disappointed anyway; not a marriage or even a trial marriage until Charlie came along. I guess this is a sort of marriage. I don't know yet if it's enough, but we're okay together, and we're saving money instead of fighting over it. I mean, how could I ever have fought over money with Nathan? We only lived together for two months. If I hadn't been afraid that he was preparing to mooch off me for life, maybe we would still be together. Maybe I would be happy.

I am happy with Charlie most of the time, I know that. If only we had met years ago, before he had a family. He tries sometimes to pull rank on me because he's had that experience and I haven't, and it makes me feel like a very old, unattractive woman, somehow. It's not a reasonable emotion, and I know he loves me, but all the same....Tom is a better son to him than Evy is a daughter. She talks at him all the time, which puts him in a bad mood, and I can't help but feel that some of it at least is about me, because she always gets quiet if I step into the room, and truth to tell, so does Charlie. I'll be glad when she has her baby; maybe we'll be more of a family then. Maybe she'll even let us watch it for her sometimes.

(Charlie)

Hmmm. Maybe another fifteen minutes. And huevos rancheros for breakfast. I guess I must've been okay in bed last night. Listen to her! Whistling! What was it Granddad used to say? "A whistling woman and a crowing hen never come to no good end." That's what he thinks! He never met up with my Dolly. No, I guess I better get up, she'll be calling soon. What did I do with my shorts?

(Tom)

When I told Dad that Pam and Rob had set me up on a double date with a friend of theirs, I thought he was going to make some remark or other, but then he thought better of it, I guess. I know he's been gradually getting more and more anxious over me, just because he got married at twenty. It's as if Rob is more like the son he wanted because he had kids early too, just out of college. I never thought Rob would actually marry Pam and stick by her; all that high school sweetheart stuff is the kind of thing he likes to make fun of when he's with me. That in particular, though, he's never said a word about, and when I say anything that even verges on satire of family life, he smiles but gets kind of quiet.

He said Pam wanted to ask Donald and Evy along too, to make three couples. I'd just as soon they didn't, but they probably are doing it for my benefit. I'm not sure just what went wrong or where, but Evy and I don't get along the way we used to. It's as if pushing Donald through life has soured her disposition. I mean, it's not as if Donald actively does anything to rile her; he just sits like a bump on a log, moves slowly, speaks slowly, blushes a lot. I've seen him at work, though, that time I took him some coffee, and there he seems like master of his domain. He's calming with people. It's just around us, the noisy Canterfields, that he doesn't know which foot to put forward first.

Well, maybe this double date will reassure Dad that I'm trying, and am open to suggestion, anyway. He forgets sometimes that Rob is five years older than me and had a head start that way too. I think he compares us a lot. Here I am, a thirty-year-old bachelor; here Rob is, a thirty-five-year-old father of a fourteen-year-old son. Dad's too

much aware of the march of generations. But to me, it feels like it was just yesterday that I got out of college, and even if it's an illusion, it seems like the world is still all before me. I need to know what I like before I can find it, or at least that's how it looks to me. Dad doesn't like to see me with casual girlfriends, so he should appreciate it if I take the time to put theory before practice, and yet not dating, it seems, looks to him as if I'm wasting time. Sometimes, he can't be suited.

(Dot)

The Semaphore

Nothing in nature
Ceases abruptly.
All flows or jogs along in ordinary style
And then little by little
Not suddenly
Stops.
Even death
The great is-is not
Flutters stiffly
A while
Like a dry leaf
Raised to meet the wind
Then falls
To meet the relentless mind of man.

If Charlie saw this poem, he wouldn't think it was about him, it's just about death. And about what I sometimes think when Fay and a couple of others in the book club start talking about structuralism and deconstruction and signs. I can barely understand the words they use, never mind the meanings. And if I don't understand the meanings, when I am trying so hard, then how would Charlie, when he is so impatient with anything that smacks of pretension, or even of ordinary learning? He's not a stupid man by far, but he is more geared to practical things. He likes to read books about history, and he really likes mysteries and suspense novels. But I've never heard him quote a single fact from anything he's read; that's funny. It's not just that he doesn't show off, he simply doesn't see the need to discuss what he reads. It's as if it's some private, almost shameful act he's participating in. Or like the one time when I found an old, dirty pair of underwear in his floor. He's an odd guy. But at least he won't get the wrong impression if I ever show him

this poem—he probably won't get much of an impression at all, he'll just grunt and say, "That's nice, I guess," after giving me that levelling glance through the glasses that are always sliding down his nose. It's amazing, I think, what a difference four years in a small liberal arts college can do. I can remember a time when I was much the same as he is, only I was never so practical. But I was shy about poetry and good prose too, and even as it was, got only a smattering of learning. Bloomfield, or "Bloomforth," as we used to call it, wasn't appreciated either by my parents, who obviously wondered what they had sent me there for—I seemed to have come out without "marketable skills," as they're known now. I was just lucky it was so small and inexpensive for the time, or I'd never have gotten to go.

But after all the years in between, when I clerked in stores and temped in offices, and my only real life was composed of the occasional nights out with friends or boyfriends, I still find that books are my best companions. Not to exclude the people I've known, and especially not Charlie, who has after all made me happy, but I really live in a way with books that I cannot seem to transcend with any other experience. And I feel so sad that he doesn't feel the same way. We can't even usually discuss the same books.

For example, once I made a study of a few of the mysteries he was reading, trying to bridge the gap between us, but he had no interest in any form of conversation about them, beyond "I liked that one more than the others, and no, I don't know or care why."

Of course, his boy Tom does come over now and then, and he has read the occasional book in common with me, but Charlie sits so quietly, not frowning, not speaking, so stiffly and formally, if Tom and I start to talk books. Lately, Tom hasn't been over much anyway. We seemed to be doomed to reruns of *Evvy*, the same old stuff over and over,

when she even condescends to address me directly. I know Tom went to college; I can't help but wonder what Charlie would have been like with a little more education and polish. No one could want a better man, but he could be a little smoother and less blunt. But after all, it's mostly his dollar that sent Tom and for a short while Evy, so I guess he has some value for the process of education. He's like a prophet who has predicted something he will never himself use or live to see, who yet knows it's precious. And *he* is precious after all, I have nothing to complain of. I just need somebody to talk to sometimes.

(Tom)

Julia Lavelle. I don't think I even dare tell Dad her name, he'll say she sounds like a striptease artist. Well, I mean, she's not hard on the eyes. I wonder where Pam and Rob came up with her. She's sure not part of the suit crowd that Evy and Donald usually hang around with. They seemed okay with her too, though, or at least Donald was his usual polite self and Evy didn't have her claws out. Not a bad night; I was expecting a lot worse. Really, I mean me, a double—actually a triple—date? Not at all my usual style. It's usually such a cloying experience, to be the new couple and have everyone watching you to see if you're going to hit it off, if their formula was successful.

Julia Bethany Lavelle. That's right. I knew there was more to it. I wonder if she felt she had to wait to spring the middle name on me until I was a little bit hammered. She didn't come out with it at once, that's for sure. But Dad can't say anything about the middle name, it's Biblical or something, isn't it? I seem to remember something about someone being raised from the dead there. Lazarus, must have been Lazarus. As long as she's not trying to marry me, she can raise me from the dead anytime.

Oh yeah, and then I started calling her Julia Beth, and right after that Donald and Evy got ready to leave, and I remember she told me her uncle that sent her to college used to call her Julia Beth. And then Evy made her one spiteful remark of the evening by pointing out that I was probably attracted to the euphony of her name—though I'm sure Evy didn't use the actual word "euphony"—by the fact that I was, as she put it, "three sheets to the wind." Donald had been having a couple too, though, because when I said, "I like you more that way, Sis," he had the nerve to grin at me. Behind her back, of

course, but he still smirked. And Dad can't wait till I get married. I should say, "I will when you do," and see what he says. In the meantime, I have no objection to spending some quality time with Julia Beth. She seems like quite a woman.

(Jeffrey, Charlie, Dot)

"And then you slap it down, jerk, you slap it down,
Till it throws you off and all around
You can only see---What??? What the—What do you want?"

"I want your attention, young man. It's Saturday, remember? You're at my house, and it's lunch time, and from now on we're not going to wear headphones at the table. We're going to be civilized and respectful, and if we don't feel like talking more than saying "Please pass the mustard," that's fine, but we're going to say it nicely. And we're going to remember that there is a lady present, and we can call her "Dolly" or we can call her "Ms. Watkins," as it suits us, but we are going to appreciate that today she has made us a wonderful meal to share, and we are going to share it with a good spirit, and not with hostility. Got that?"

"Yeah, I got it. And you get this, *sir*. This earpiece cost me \$300 made by cutting the grass of a bunch of old—and you don't jerk it out of my ear because then you will owe me \$300. It's brand new, too."

An aggrieved tone. I haven't hurt his feelings, only his possession, or possibly his pride in it. So much for Dolly's tender agonizing over how to get him to act right.

"I'm sure something that cost so much for so little won't have come to any harm. And don't forget to wash up before coming to the table. People customarily pass food around at the table, you see, and no one likes someone else's dirty thumb in the mashed potatoes, or even a clean thumb." Maybe sarcasm is more appropriate to such a smart mouth.

"Yeah, yeah, I know that part."

He stalks off to the bathroom, shoving his device into a pocket big enough for a full-grown possum almost, his drawers drooping down nearly around his private parts. The way these kids dress beats me. I mean, I know we did stupid and weird stuff when I was young too, but I would've been afraid of losing my pants in front of people on the street if they had drooped so low. At least he's wearing a belt.

"Okay! Lunch is ready, guys! I hope you're hungry."

Now she tiptoes up to me and whispers, "Did you ask him not to use his headphones during lunch, sweetie?"

"I did nothing of the kind. I *told* him not to, and after some preliminary rudeness, he went off to wash his hands. I hope we'll have no further deaf-android-at-the-table-routine."

(Charlie)

To my surprise, lunch went off without a hitch. He didn't look up much, or say much, or really even eat much, a first for him in the last category. It's as if when he isn't deafening himself, he has no need to load it in with a forklift.

When Pam drove by to pick up Jeffrey at five o'clock, a bit late for her, he didn't actually wave or anything, but for the first time as he got into the car, he turned and looked back at us where we stood on the porch waving and mostly getting a response from Pam, who smiled and raised a hand. He might be planning some new mischief, but I doubt it. I almost think he's not really a bad kid, just a kid whose parents work too much and neglect him without intending to. He needs a brother or sister to keep him company.

(Dot)

Well, I can hardly believe it, but I think I have an admirer. I think so, I'm not entirely sure. Other than Charlie, I mean. A younger man, about 40 or so to my 53. I never thought we would ever have a man in the literary club (as it has now become since we both discuss books and write things). But there he is. He's actually the brother of Anne, the quiet woman who writes such terse, depressing poems but has such a great sense of humor when it comes to books. She brought him with her at first because he's staying with her while his condo gets repainted. Apparently, he's some kind of free-lance photographer; I guess they make lots of money. Anyway, his name is Jimmy Knox, and for the life of me, I can't think what he's up to. He writes poems that seem really satirical in spots, but then tender and emotional in other spots, and he always seems to read them right at me. I've written a poem about it, a sort of pseudo-sonnet with too many lines, which I will probably never have the nerve to read at the club meetings.

Is It Love, Darling, or Is It Satire?

There's a question in your eyes, my love, it's clear
Do I understand, did I take the hint, did I hear?
I heard, but can't be sure which tone you pitched higher
Is it love, darling, oh tell me, or is it satire?

That both the point and counterpoint were there
I wish you could admit, to clear the air,
But love, I can't quite ask and you can't quite say
Whether you meant the gibing sense to stay.

Or whether, indeed, you merely were self-mocked
At that same second when your feelings balked
And in place of a full embrace you gave a grin,
Oh, what a strange literary century we are in!

So please continue to write me sonnets, do,
But stick a little closer to the tried and true,
So that I, in making contact with your mind,
So thorough a split from your body needn't find,
And if to decipher multiple threads I aspire,
I needn't be skewered in place by your satire.

Charlie would probably totally misunderstand if he saw this poem, with me calling the male figure in it "my love" and saying that I didn't want to find his body split off from his mind when he writes me love poems. Charlie doesn't have a lot of imagination that way. He might think I really wanted someone other than him, and then the fat would be in the fire. He's not the kind of man to tolerate funny business; if you love him, act like it, if you don't, then don't make pretenses. The worst possibility would be if I were really confused about which guy I wanted. Whereas another man might be patient and gallantly wait to find out, Charlie, with no real lack of gallantry but with a forthright heart and a no-nonsense manner, would show you the door. I suppose it's the best of all possible worlds that I do love Charlie as much as I do; I can't imagine cheating on him. It would be like—oh, I can't imagine what it would be like, something very bad indeed. Sometimes I'm very grateful that we're in such a committed relationship and over the hump of indecision, as it were.

(Jeffrey)

Mom wants to know why I don't want to go over to old man Canterfield's anymore. Why I want to stay here by myself. Man, that old bastard really rides my ass all the time about something or other. How can I tell her that it's because I do the same things there I do at home that she and Dad used to bitch about, only they've stopped bitching and just—I guess given up. Well, why shouldn't I do the things I want to do? It's not like I'm setting anything on fire or writing crap on walls or gunning anybody down. And I'm fourteen years old now, old enough to babysit if that weren't such a girly thing to do. I'd do it though, if it was the only way I could make money. Which reminds me, I've got to get that latest Davy Dead thing. That and Colombo-Colombo's new stuff. Only \$50 more now and I'll have enough for both. I'll just bet old Canterfield doesn't pay anybody to mow his lawn, though. He's so full of himself that he probably makes a contest of it to mow his own more than the other old dudes. Just wait, someday he'll need to pay someone to mow his lawn, and I'll have my band playing gigs and won't be available for comment.

(Charlie, Tom, Dot's poetry notebook)

"Hey, Dad." Their porch needs fixing; my sandals make a hollow, clumping sound, and it feels as if some of the boards are moving a little underfoot. I wonder why Dad hasn't fixed that. He's usually into stuff like repairs.

"Hay is for horses." He's not in a great mood.

"Has Evy been here, by any chance?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you don't really sound like your usual cheery self. I mean, just going by the way she gets at *me*, I thought maybe—"

"If I had shared my poetic soul with you and said 'Straw's cheaper, grass is free, buy a farm, and you'll have all three,' would it break you of the habit of greeting people with such a word?"

Wow, he's really boiling.

"C'mon, Dad, I say 'Hey' all the time and you don't react like this. What's wrong?"

"Just a day in the life of, I guess. No, it's—we've got Jeffrey Marks staying with us on Saturdays and days when he's off from school, you must've heard about that from Pam and Rob. Not much left of the school year, and I don't know how many days we'll be expected to keep him, and his manners are just about ready to drive me through the ceiling. When you come in here "Hey-ing" me, it sounds like what he would do if he ever said a civil word."

Good, an explanation and he's simmering down a little.

"But I've always said it, ever since I was in high school, I think." There's something else. He doesn't seem to know how to broach the subject; his face is working funny.

"I guess I can tell you. You're my son, after all, and you know how women are." Whoops, some personal problem. I hope it doesn't have to do with sex; what do I say if he says he can't get it up anymore, or something like that? Or should I be thinking, "Oh, great, a good chat with my dad about anything at all, after such a long time?" Hurry up, answer him.

"Sure, Dad, you can tell me. I know women can be weird sometimes. So can we all I guess, but women—"

"Yeah, well, for the longest time now, Dolly has been carrying a book around, I mean a notebook with some kind of scribble in it. I just figured it had book reports or notes in it about the stuff they were reading in the book club. But that's not it: it seems that she's also writing down poems from somewhere, or maybe writing them herself, and I got a taste of one of them today that didn't really agree with me. I mean, I wasn't snooping or anything intentionally, but she had something on the stove, and the buzzer went off. She hustled into the kitchen to take care of it, and I just had a peek. She had been hugging that notebook to her chest a few minutes before and kind of watching me when she didn't think I saw her. Well, I mean, if she didn't want me to get curious, why was she writing in the same room where I was watching the ball game?"

Uh-oh. "Oh no, Dad. You looked? That doesn't even sound like you."

"No, and I'll never do it again. But—she's out now. I mean, I didn't say anything, and we had lunch like always, and she went on out. But she left the thing there where it was, almost like she meant for me to see it. Could you—would you—I mean, there's just this

poem there, and I'm sure she's not cheating on me, but I can't be sure for the life of me whether or not she is up to something. Maybe she doesn't love me as much as she thought she did? It's peculiar. I want you to see this poem, Tom. You've been to college, and maybe women who've been to college like the two of you do things like this. Do you think you can bring yourself to look at it?"

He doesn't even have the nerve to look me in the face with a request like this. What's gotten into him? It's not normal at all for him to be so insecure.

"Dad, if you really want me to look, I will. But maybe I should preface that, or should have, with the remark that I just don't understand why you're getting so bent out of shape by something so ordinary. People write poems in diaries and journals, and trespassers can't always like what they see. Maybe she was just in some kind of funny mood when she wrote it, like you are now, and if you wrote a poem now, she might not like the look of it either, did that ever occur to you? And whatever else happens, my advice to you is never to tell her that you peeked. Let her keep her secrets. Hell, I kept a journal before I got so busy, still write in it sometimes at long intervals, and I wouldn't show it to anyone, because people just don't understand other people's insides, not even those of the people they love the most. Especially not those people." Now he looks ashamed; maybe I've overdone it. Well, let's have it over and done with. "Where is this poem?"

"Do you really think it's okay?"

"Not really, but I don't always do what's okay, and I don't like seeing you like this. Let's have a look at it."

"It's in the den. Come inside and don't move the notebook or she might know." Man, he's spooked. She must've really reamed him good.

He points to the notebook and I see this longish bit of poetry in a pointy, but loopy script. "Okay, Dad, here goes. Give me a moment's quiet, okay?"

"Sure."

Words and Music

Dear heart
Can't you see it's day
A day of colors and shapes
All cast about like blocks
Willy-nilly
On a child's rug.
Why do you say
Words mean nothing
When they so clearly mean these things?

My dearest
Can't you hear the sound of trumpets
And violins, of woodwinds and thrumming
Drumbeats
All courting your ears
Waiting to make away with your assertions—
Even despair sings like a captive bird
And yet, you claim to hear it not.

Oh knowing love
What in fact do you know of starlight
So swallowed up by these nights of great cities,
By the glow of your certainty
That you can be certain of nothing—
But see, the little spots of white in the sky
Each one likewise asserting
Each one borne into place by a similar thought
Or breath, or spark of insistence,
Each one making a pyre of itself
Based on what it believes, or can't quite—
Why do you demand fealty
To what does you in
When each bright daub of light
Says, "I am here, and I count for something,
Were you even blind to the sight,
And caught up still only in your convoluted

Attempts at might, right, and the above-all
Correct answer." If there is none, after all,
Then why your sorry plight,
And why your so congenial acceptance
Of my difference from you
As if consorting with the enemy made you all right?

"Well, Dad, at a quick glance, I think that's a pretty nice poem. Not a great poem, but a loving, if somewhat teasing, or ironic, poem. And she uses terms of endearment in it, don't you see those? She's not out of love with you, if it's about you; she's just psychoanalyzing you. Women like that sort of stuff."

"Well, I might not be crazy about that or the poem either, but it by God better be about me, or else I'm going to think she's found somebody else. Boy, you never can tell, can you? Just when—"

"Just when what, Dad?" This must be one of the most substantive talks I've ever had with him. Who would have thought he had so many feelings? I mean, his anger and frustration have been near the surface sometimes, but he's always been an old trooper when it comes to self-confidence.

"Well....I was sort of thinking of making it permanent before too long. I mean, she's living here, and you know, Evy *has* been on my back a bit, almost as if she was trying to split us up. That would be one in the eye for her. We don't really have to worry for money, mine from the company's enough for us, and Dolly pulls her weight by doing stuff around the house. Even with the recession the way it is, Canterfield-Marks has made us a bundle, if we husband our resources, as they say. Hell, I may even be able to leave something for you and Evy too when we're both gone. So, I mean, we don't need to stay single because of our money situation. We're not that old, anyway. I'm just sorry

you didn't want to go into construction; your future would have been secure. I can't help but think that owning a bookstore is a shaky proposition these days. I know people read, but think how many books we've exchanged with friends of ours, and think of all the second-hand book stores that only do that."

"Yeah, well, their existence should prove to you that it's possible to make money even off old books in far from pristine shape. I'm fine, Dad, and I may start dealing a few second-hand and rare books myself."

"Now, not rare books. Remember that guy over in Holderston just went belly-up on those two years ago, and things weren't as bad then as they are now."

"Ron Harris. That's because he didn't have a full-service bookstore with Internet connection and first-run titles and a kid's section. I have all that, and I'm turning a good profit right now. And if something happens to change that, I'll know what to do."

"Oh yeah, what will you do?"

That sounds more like him. I guess my work here is almost done, for what it was worth. Cantankerous Canterfield is back on track. I almost think Dad was an old man long before he really got to be—what is it now, fifty-five? Yeah, he'll do okay. Good news about him and Dot.

"Not to worry, Dad, I've got a sound business head, or so I've been told. There will be something I can do. Maybe even write poetry." I couldn't resist. Man, look at that expression. No, he's not mad now, just trying to see how serious I am. "I'm glad you and Dot are going to tie the knot."

"Wait and see for that; and don't say anything to anybody about it yet, I want to get my bearings first."

"Okay. Oh, on that same topic, I met a woman the other night. She rejoices in the name of Julia Bethany Lavelle, and she's gorgeous and sweet and funny, and I can't think how on earth Pam and Rob met her, since they haven't told me."

"You could always ask them; it might be a good thing to know, before you go getting serious about her. And what did you mean, 'on that same topic?' You're not ready to marry her yet, are you?"

"Women was the topic I had in mind, Dad. And no, I'm not in any hurry to tie myself down, not even if she starts writing funny poems about me and praises the funny poems I write about her."

"I don't write poems."

A touch of the bearish about him again; not yet ready to be teased by me, I guess.

"I thought you were anxious for me to find a mate, Dad. Don't let Dot rile you, I would bet a fortune plus some that she didn't mean to. Maybe some day she'll show you her poems and ask your opinion."

Funny, he didn't react. Looks like he's thinking some very odd things.

"I *am* worried about you, Tom. You know what they say: 'A son's a son till he takes a wife, a daughter's a daughter all of her life.' Well, I can't for the life of me keep Evy from worrying me along all the time, but it's like it's the reverse of that little saying: I don't have to worry about her much, but at least until you settle down and start a life with someone, I'm going to wonder if you'll end your life alone. Believe me, that time I spent alone after your mom died was no picnic."

"We're both okay, Dad. Evy may be holding onto her privilege of daughtering you constantly, but like you said, you don't have to worry too much about her. And I am

happy and content, and who knows what the future holds? Keep in mind that Evy's two years older than I am, and was always the sort to settle down. Now, that doesn't mean that I'm a tumbleweed, but let me at least roll along peacefully a bit longer, until I feel the impulse. You married fairly early, remember."

He snorts, but "Impulse," is all he says.

"Dad, not to change the subject, but your boards here on the porch seem a little loose or warped or something. Should I bring over my stuff and help you fix them, or what?"

"Sure, if your impulses steer you that way. I think that rocking chair over there's throwing the whole thing off. At least, the boards under it make more noise than any of the other ones."

"I don't know, Dad, the ones up the stairs and to the left are a little creaky too. When do you want me to come?"

"Whenever you want, except not on a Saturday, because that kid kind of requires some watching. Not that he does much of anything, but that's not to say he won't. And come before the end of the school year. I don't need the money, but it's a shame that Dolly told his mother not to pay us anything for keeping him. Once summer comes, I can't imagine how much we'll be spending on him, just like he was one of our own. Not that I'm tight, or anything, but he's recovered his appetite lately, and eats like a horse. Or really, a cow—at least, he seems to have three stomachs. I put the fear of God in him for a little while, and it seemed to throw him off his feed, but nothing lasts forever."

"Oh, well, Dad, consider it a charitable contribution. Poor Rob is always too busy these days to spend much time with him, and that kid, from what I've seen of him, is

lonely more than anything else. He can probably use some parenting from you."

Approach him on his good side; I've always been better at that than Evy.

"Anyway, Dad, I should get going. But just so you know, I'm taking Julia Bethany out tomorrow night. So my dance card, as they say, is full for right now." Kiss him on his head, or shake his hand? Don't want him associating me with condescension or pity; better go for the handshake.

"Well, it's nice to see you haven't forgotten all of your manners."

"Love you, Dad. Hang loose. I'll be around soon about the porch, but I'll call first."

"You too, son. And thanks."

(Evy, Blaise,Donald)

Here *he* comes again. Why does he always have to come around when Donald isn't here? He makes me nervous. Not but what it's nice to have a lovely cup of tea brought to me, and one I don't even have to pay for. But after all, our business relationship is over, until he goes off on another of his trips somewhere. It's just that he asks all sorts of personal questions; maybe he doesn't like Donald.

"*Bonjour, cherie*. Are you working hard today?"

That jangling the doorbell makes behind him always seems louder than it does for anyone else, he always seems to be disturbing the peace and silence.

"And how is the mother-to-be? See, I brought you one of those things, those sconce—but that can't be it, that's a light mounted on a wall—"

"Hi. I think scones is the word you're groping for. Thank you. I'm not very hungry right now, but I will save it and have it for my lunch, with my—oh, careful, that's a very important report, don't spill the tea on it."

"No, I am careful, very careful. And here is your sugars and your cream. See, I even brought me a *café au lait* to have along with you. But you are busy, maybe?"

He takes a delicate little sip. What would it matter if I'm busy, he sits down across from me anyway. What a day for it to be slow! Still, Donald sees no harm in him. I think he even likes him. Well, he would, after all; he brings a lot of business our way.

"I have a few moments. I thought you were in Portugal." I thought things might be peaceful for a while.

He waves a hand airily. "Portugal, Greece, then Brussels, but after all, my home, it is here now. My base, *c'est-à-dire*. But I think next week sometime I will go to New York for a day or so. Maybe by train: it has been a long, very long time since I have been on a train. My *grand'mère*, when I was young, took me everywhere by train. It is old-fashioned now, but still I like it. So, you will arrange it for me, *oui*? The same as always?"

Whoops. Almost spilled that blasted tea myself. At least he's here for a reason this time. "Okay, sure. Departure date? What day do you want to leave?"

"Oh, but no, *cherie*, we will let the good Donal' make the ticket. I just like to tell you that I will be away for a while, you see. You are my friend, and I like you to know that I will not be able to bring your tea a few days."

What the hell do I care? I can make tea here, if it comes to that.

"But you are distressed, yes? Your face makes a sad—a sad—no, I do not know....You will miss me? But I will come back soon, *très vite*."

"I see. Well, that's—that's just fine. Well, you let us know when you plan your trip, and we will be very happy to set it up for you, as always." He puts his hand on my hand and pats it. I can't tell if he's just being French, or if he's—good, he's getting up to go. That was quick. Usually he's in here for half an hour at a time. Sometimes, I swear, I can't get rid of him even when there are customers here. I have to talk to Donald; but no, he needs the business, especially now that the baby's almost here and there's a recession. Besides, Donald told me last time that it was possible to be too—what was his word? No, it's gone. But he meant "prudish." He didn't say it, but he meant it, I think. I guess he thinks he knows more than I do about what people are like, having been in this

business longer than I have. Still, I have a good head on my shoulders. I know what's what. And that man makes me nervous.

"Why do you look at me like that, I wonder? But you must be tired, you must rest at home soon, and then your baby, he will come—"

"She."

"*Pardon?*"

"She. The baby is a girl."

He makes a wry face. What a sexist!

"Ah, but you have ruin the surprise! You know already what the baby is to be!"

Oh, so that's not it. He's just not in favor of modern science.

"Well, we sort of wanted to get things bought, you know, pink or blue...."

"Pink or blue?"

"Pink for a girl, you know, blue for a boy."

"Well, but *cherie*—I have never have a wife, or a baby either, but you know—"

"Yes? What is it?" I didn't mean to make my voice so sharp, but that's how it sounds.

What's he trying to get at now?

"Is it good luck for you, you think, to look so far ahead? To buy before, you know—"

"Good luck? Good luck has nothing to do with it. We have an excellent doctor, and the baby is in perfect shape. And so am I." Not losing my wits yet, anyway. What a mean-spirited thing for him to say! I mean, I know some people feel the way he does, but when he knows that I *don't* feel that way, what bad taste to bring it up! Just goes to show, not all Frenchmen are smooth all the time. As hard as he tries.

"*Non*, now I upset my friend, and I do not mean to upset my friend, my good friend. But you will forgive me, yes? My only concern is for you. And for *le bon mari, bien entendu*. And the little baby."

"For what? I don't speak French, Mr.—"

He laughs at me. Why is he laughing? "Now, you know my name is Blaise. Like the great Pascal. Why do you want to call me Monsieur this or that?"

"I don't know anything about any Pascal." My goodness, I sound downright rude. But *where* is Donald? He was due back ten minutes ago. I think we need to get something straight here, though. "Look, Mr. DeProst—"

"*Aa--aa*, Blaise."

He tuts me in his own tongue and shakes his finger reprovingly.

"Blaise, then." But you have to be firm with men sometimes. "I am perfectly capable of selling you a ticket and arranging an itinerary; there are very few things that Donald does that I can't do, pregnant or not. Some things he does by himself, but not many. I'm just trying to maintain a good *working* relationship with you. But of course it's all right if you want Donald to do your ticket. He should be back very soon."

He achieves a wounded expression, and spreads his arms wide.

"But am not I your friend? I come here to see you many times, not only when I have to make a little *excursion*; do you say I am not your friend? I bring you teas and roses and scones, no, sconces. And you cannot even use my name my friends all call me?"

Thank God, here comes Donald. And Blaise—I mean DeProst—knows that he's been inappropriate somehow, because look how he deflates and gets up to meet Donald, all suave and friendly. Is that really all he is, *really*? Just a fish a bit out of water? I

somehow doubt it. I know I'm right to suspect him, but I can't lay my finger on the way to get rid of these little get-togethers minus Donald without losing his business.

"—and your little wife, the charming Eve, she will *not, mais non*, call me Blaise. But you and I, we say "Donal" and "Blaise," do we not? And I tell her many times that she also is my friend."

Look at Donald. He hasn't got a clue.

"Oh, of course she can call you Blaise. She's just a little shy and formal, that's our Evy."

Remind me to kick him later.

"Honey, I've got David Barnes's itinerary ready, if you want to fax it over to him now. Or better yet, advise him as to the five or six changed dates in an e-mail and send the rest of the info in an attachment. That way, we can emphasize the things he might otherwise miss."

"I'll get on it right away."

"Now it is all business, I think it is time for me to go." How can he take that tone in front of Donald? So playful. As if we had been playing!

"Goodbye, *Blaise*. Let Donald know when you want that trip to New York scheduled, won't you?" No sense in letting a paying customer get away scot-free.

"Oh, were you planning another of your famous trips, Blaise?"

Now we've got Donald's attention.

"Just let me know, and I'll get right on it. Though Evy can do it too, of course. The Plaza is participating in some special city-wide events in the next few weeks: here, here's a pamphlet that we just received today, in case you're interested."

Finally, he's leaving. All unintentionally, Donald is talking him out of the door.

"Goodbye, Ms. Eve! I see you later some time!"

There he goes. A wave of the hand ought to be enough for him. It's not as if he's really hideous, or grotesquely old, or particularly bad or mean. He's just so—I wonder if that's what a lounge lizard is like. I remember reading that phrase once. No, I don't think so. To look at, he's quite handsome, and he's a very tasteful dresser. And after all, he must be rich, quite rich. What is it he said he did?—oh yes, importing and exporting for his uncle's firm. He must be a few years older than Donald and I are, I think. If only he weren't so pushy, I think I would like him more. It makes him seem—I don't know, stupid, maybe. To think that he can put one over on me like that. What would he be like if I weren't pregnant?

(Blaise)

Such a little fish, to struggle so hard on the hook! But that sweet face, which becomes so haughty and cold, and then so helpless again. After the baby, then she will tire of the good man Donal', and we will see then what fate will bring.

Do I amuse myself only, or do I mean to be a husband? Oh, no, not that, surely not that. I am so young, I have so much life to live. Maybe a husband someday, but surely not for the good Eve. Only to see if she has a touch of *le Diable* in her, that will much intrigue me. And she will be none the worse for it. Every woman wants a secret lover, in her heart of hearts. He, he has no sense about his wife, either. He does not provide her the little courtesies that keep women from looking around them for amusement. Yes, soon she will decide that I am best after all.

But how will I tear myself away from her, when the time comes? That I do not know yet, I cannot see. All the same, it is good practice for my life, finally to engage myself with a woman who already has a married life and cannot disrupt mine. I am tired, finally, of these little girls who are unmarried and want to catch me napping. I do not nap, not since a long time ago. Almost over Natalie I made a great mistake. She would have married me well, but then she would have made a fool of me. And that would be just too much to bear. It would grieve my old uncle's heart, for one thing, that I, his heir, should be cuckolded and not know who my children's father was, *peut-être*.

Yes, I think if only I bear myself with patience, I will have my reward of Eve.

(Evy, Donald)

"He's such a—such a—pretender, Donald. Such a stereotype. He can't be genuine, that's all. He's up to something."

"Like what? All he does is take trips and put money in our pockets."

"He's always hanging around, bringing me tea, which I shouldn't be having much of now anyway, and roses, of all things. Do I have to spell it out?"

"Oh, Evy, surely not. I think he's just lonely. He probably only knows business acquaintances here. I mean, he seems to spend all his time travelling. We're the only people he sees regularly, maybe. And you're pregnant."

"So what? He doesn't seem to notice; or at least, it doesn't stop him from hovering around."

"Maybe you make him feel protective."

"The real question is, why don't you feel protective?"

"I do, hon, but you're not a cripple. You're a very strong woman."

"He doesn't seem to think so."

"Well, I don't know a lot about Europeans, but I know some. Women's rights still aren't the same over there as they are over here. At least when the Santinis and the Revaliers travel, the husbands make all the arrangements, and the women come in here only with them, and only to pick up tickets, and they're all gussied up with perfumes and expensive clothes and shoes, and the men are very polite and wait on them hand and foot, but there's no mistaking who's in charge. And they're fairly young couples. That's probably the kind of atmosphere Blaise is used to. Maybe it's a class thing."

"Maybe. But he's not wearing a ring, and he says, anyway, that he's single. At any rate, he never mentions a wife or family."

"Well, we don't know him all that well. Give him time. And not all men wear a ring, after all, especially not the old-fashioned ones."

"No, he definitely said he was unmarried. I would feel better if I knew there were some little DeProsts at home and a wife standing over him with a rolling pin when he gets back."

"Now who's being stereotypical? That was a very sexist thing you just said. If you really want to know more about him, why don't you just ask? It's been my experience that people like to talk about themselves."

"No, all he seems to want to talk about is me. It makes me uncomfortable. And besides, if I start asking questions, particularly about his private life, he might get the wrong impression."

"He knows *you're* married, sweetheart. Just give him a chance as a person. I promise if he makes a pass at you that I'll chase him out, profit notwithstanding."

Donald is right and wrong at the same time. I'm taking it all too seriously, but he's not taking it seriously enough. He's so—good, so *bon*, like Blaise said, *le bon mari*. I can still understand something from high school French, but I'd never tell Blaise that. And Donald wouldn't even understand if I told him that I almost suspect Blaise of making fun of him: he's too *good* to everyone to understand.

(Dot, Jimmy)

Jimmy Knox asked me last night at the lit. club meeting if I was single. I said yes, and I know I blushed, because he touched my cheek with his finger and said, "Did I embarrass you? I'm just being nosy, sorry."

If he was just being nosy, then what am I to think about all those poems he read at me? I find it hard to think of myself as a muse. "Are you? Single, I mean," I asked, even though I knew he probably is, or else his sister Anne would've said that he *and his family* were staying with her for a while.

"Just divorced last year. No kids, though. So, why don't you read your poems more often? Or don't you write very many? I had you pegged for a copious writer."

"Oh, I just feel—I don't know, they're not that good. Fay and Melena make me feel a little nervous about reading. They're always so angry about everything. The one time I did read a poem that they were both there for, they exchanged a look that spoke volumes. I guess I'm the enemy because I'm with a man." That seemed the best way to tell him tactfully. I can't charge bulldog ahead, like Charlie. Of course, Charlie would probably be bothered and embarrassed if he had to warn away interested women, too. Flattered, but embarrassed.

"Oh, are you? What a shame! I can still ask you out for coffee, though, can't I?"

He has a nice smile. He's really a nice man.

"Don't pay any attention to Fay, she's had a really hard time in both her personal and professional life to date, according to Anne, anyway. It seems that sometime before you and I joined, all she did was relate all the books they were reading to her own experience

in front of everyone else. Maybe that's what we're supposed to do with literature in private, but it made everyone uncomfortable. And Melena is just a sort of chorus for Fay. She's not so objectionable by herself, I don't think. So, how's about that coffee? Or a cold drink, whatever? May I ask you along?"

"Well, you could, and I'd be flattered, but you know, Charlie, my—my housemate, is really rather old-fashioned. He might not understand it. I mean, he never went to college or read poetry, not poetry, for heaven's sake, and he might think I was shifting gears on him, if you see what I mean. But I'd love to be your friend here at the lit. club."

"On the other hand, he might think that I'm just the kind of silly, useless fribble that writes poetry and isn't to be taken seriously," he said, which made me laugh. "Or maybe Charlie could come for coffee too. But I don't mean to pressure you. It was just a thought. Okay, I guess I'll see you next week, then, won't I?"

"Sure. Though Thomas Hardy isn't my favorite. Too depressing." He wrinkled his nose as if he agreed, but said nothing. "Yes, fine, I'll see you then. Bye-bye," I said.

He waved and stepped back for me to go. It's a really good thing I didn't read that poem I wrote to him, he would've gotten it right away. I was only worried about Charlie seeing it, but Jimmy would've taken it too seriously, I feel sure.

It's nice to be interesting to someone, even if my life is already full of Charlie. God knows how it happened, with Jimmy so much younger and better looking than I am. Life is funny.

(Dot, Charlie)

Charlie sure is nervous about that baby. Alice, they've decided to call her, in memory of Donald's mother. Alice Pryce. If she decides to hyphenate her names when she grows up, if women are still doing that then, she'll be Alice Canterfield-Pryce. It sounds okay, I guess. I wonder how much longer they're going to be; Charlie said he would call from the hospital when the baby came along. I'm supposed to bring along the picnic lunch so that he and Donald and I can eat at the hospital park, and then I can go in and see the baby. If Evy is awake and seeing people, that is.

Funny, it's not characteristic of Charlie to admit to difficulties between other people. He usually tries to ignore the fact that Evy and I have problems relating; at most, he gets a little irritable with one or the other of us, sometimes both of us, it seems, and just sits on the porch stewing until he overcomes it. He's not bad-tempered, really, just—I think he was brought up really strictly. And people always have to be polite.

So, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when he suggested that I come later, after Donald had had a chance to be with Evy first. It's just odd that he was so smooth and tactful about it all. He usually hems and haws when he has something difficult to say.

He said, "You know, Dot"—he even called me what I've been trying to get him to!—"you could really do me and Donald a big favor by bringing us lunch over at the hospital. Well, I mean, you know what their cafeteria food is. Nothing complicated, just a simple sort of picnic lunch, maybe a few of those fancy touches that are so easy for you. Now, I don't say that Donald will eat an awful lot, but you can always count on my appetite, and

we three can have lunch in the hospital park area. Then you can go up and see the baby after Evy's had a chance to get all rested up a bit, and get her hair straightened, you know, that stuff. I know how you women are about being neat-looking for each other."

If there was even a sour note, even a little, it was that last sentence.

"Well, but," I said, "Donald is going to see her. Of course, he's her husband. And you're going to be there. Were you planning to go in and see her too? I don't mean to intrude, but I thought maybe I could help her straighten and comb and help her on with her new bed jacket we got her. But if you really think I'll be more useful away from the hospital—"

"I do, Dot, and it has to do with Evy. She's—well, kind of temperamental when she's not feeling well, and I don't imagine she'll be at the top of her game after having a baby. It would be better, I think, if we concentrated on supporting Donald and making sure he in turn can look after her okay. You'll sort of be like the relief pitcher coming in to relieve the stress a bit. You'll be all fresh, and bearing good food, something for Donald to concentrate on other than his own troubles. Is that okay, do you mind?"

A quick hug, very affectionate. The nicest way I've ever heard of calling one woman a bitch to another one, and implying that her husband is under the wheel. Well, at least Charlie sees me as on his side in the struggle. Of course, she *is* having a baby.

"Oh, fine," I said. "I'm just really eager to see the baby too. But I don't mind at all helping out if it will help you and Donald, and Evy, indirectly. Be sure and offer to babysit, if she gives you an opening. I used to take care of some babies, and have the experience, and you've been a father. Not right away, maybe, but when she and Donald are starting to get frazzled and need—well, like you said, some relief."

"Will do, m'dear. I'm sure at some point our babysitting talents will be called for. I know if Peg and I hadn't had friends to watch Tom and Evy sometimes while we went out, we wouldn't have been such good parents. We would've been under a lot more stress, for one thing, though people didn't talk about that then nearly as much as they do now."

And that's where we left it, until yesterday, when Donald called and said he'd just driven Evy to the hospital with her things. Nothing more happened until this morning, at least not here. Then I heard the phone ring a couple of times, and Charlie talking in a really intent way. He hung up fast and grabbed his jacket and looked in the closet for that hideous old hat of his, as if a person would wear such a thing to the hospital.

"What is it, Charlie dear, who was it?"

"It was Donald, Evy's almost ready to deliver. Have you seen my hat?"

"Don't you remember, you gave it to me to mend and wash for you. It's not really appropriate for the hospital, anyway, you know. Why don't you wear the other one, your driving cap?"

"It doesn't stay on well, I think it's too small. Are you sure you're not done with my hat yet? I would just be more comfortable waiting in it."

He was practically dancing around in half-circles, looking for his car keys, with one arm still stabbing into the jacket sleeve.

"Sorry, my love. But it'll look so much better on you when it's not ripped at the seams anymore. Can I get anything else for you to take with you? Be sure and get some ice chips for Evy to suck on, I've heard that that's what they use."

"Donald and the nurses have probably taken care of that by now, but if not, I'll see about it. There's not much left for me to do, I don't imagine, but keep out of the way and let everybody carry on."

"If you hurry, you may catch Donald for a word before he goes into the delivery room with Evy."

"I never went in with Peg for either of my kids; odd how things change. Okay, I guess you can start your stuff here. I'll call when Donald comes out of the room again and Evy's settled down for a rest, or whatever happens; anyway, I'll call."

Another quick kiss and he was out of the door. It's interesting that he bestows little signs of affection so repeatedly around this subject, as if he thinks he has to persuade me to his point of view. And I think I'm a fairly sensible woman, not one to take offense unreasonably at his attentions to his daughter. I wonder what Peg was like; he's said before that she and Evy argued some, but he always seems anxious to downplay it. Quite honestly, I can imagine a teenaged Evy being moody and distraught and a test of any mother's patience. And of course, Charlie would demand loyalty and good manners of his children, in respect to their mother. I can see him demanding it even if their mother tested his patience as well. All he's said to me is that "she was a good woman, but even good women have their faults." Or words to that effect.

Anyway, the seafood salad isn't going to make itself. I should get started on the things that I couldn't do earlier. What time is it, I wonder? Ten-fifteen in the morning. I hope they're hungry by the time I get there; it probably won't be long now.

(Evy, Charlie)

"So, Dad, you don't have your shadow with you. What's the matter, single woman's aversion to childbirth?"

Evy brushes a stray strand of hair from her eyes and smiles up at me, and for a moment the sweetness in her tone could almost convince me that she's making a happy enquiry into the flowers blooming in my garden or something. She's tired, I can tell that. Must be, to be so obvious in that way. No, scratch that. The opposite of obvious. She's usually *more* forthright, but as if she's doing me a favor. This is just a little stinkweed bloom by the wayside.

"I asked her to come later, Evy, since I thought you might prefer to see only family at first. Though to me, she *is* family of sorts. Besides, she's fixing Donald and me a lunch so that we don't have to eat that cafeteria food. We can bring you some up, if you're hungry. I'm sure you won't feel like facing the rubber meatloaf they have around this place."

She laughs as gleefully as if I had given her a million dollars. "Dad, you're so behind the times. Some of the best cheap food around is available in hospital cafeterias these days. At least here at Nottingham General. And Dolly's food, you know, is a little rich for me. What's she bringing, anyway?"

"She mentioned something about seafood salad and cool summer things, I don't know exactly what. But she usually brings some kind of fruit salad too, and you might find that refreshing. I tell you what, when she gets here, Donald and I will run something non-fattening up to you, if you like. Actually, I should call Dolly now that you and the baby

are both doing fine. Shall I get the nurse for anything, or are you just waiting for Donald to come back?" Get out of here while she's still fairly placid. Call Dolly, but avoid an incident of verbal female wrestling, if at all possible.

"No, Dad, thanks. I'm just really, really tired and drained. And I'm not watching my weight you know, not as long as I'm nursing, for however long I can do that. Donald's been talking about getting an office temp to cover for me while I'm away, but I don't want to be away too long."

She looks over at the bassinet and smiles in that indescribable way that new mothers have when viewing the dear sight of all their recent pain and travail. I remember it well from Peg, she did exactly the same thing constantly for the first few weeks, until the loss of sleep changed her expression to one a baby shouldn't see. I don't know how they do it, anyway. Thank God Donald is so level-headed.

"Well, is there anything I can get you, or have sent up? Dolly is so excited, and wanted to be here for you so much." I hope I haven't put my foot in it with that, but it seems safe now that I'm on my way out.

"No, Dad, just send Donald up if you see him anywhere, but don't search him out. Take it easy. I mean to, while I can." She smiles at me and closes her eyes, then opens them again and waves weakly.

I really think that this baby might just be the best thing that has happened to this family for a while. Now, if only we can shake off babysitting teenaged boys like Jeffrey for a while and take care of our own infant, we'll be doing just fine.

(The Canterfield family group)

"Dolly, love, won't you pass the beans? Julia Beth, another chicken leg? Donald, how about some more barbeque, or some slaw or potato salad or something? Evy, do you have everything you need?"

"Everything but some peace and quiet, Dad. No, I'm joking, but you have to relax. Doesn't he, Tom? All of us here at once seem to have overexcited Dad. Too much company at once, maybe."

"Don't be condescending, Evy, I'm not a doddering old fool yet. When do I get to hold my granddaughter Alice again? After dinner, I hope. She needs to get more used to me and Dolly, seeing as how we're going to be keeping her on some of those days your nanny gets off. And I hope, Evy, you're doing something for yourself and not hanging around the office all the time. You know, those things you women do, like going to get your nails done or going to a day spa, or something like that. Don't run yourself into the ground with errands and Alice and Donald and the office and the house and—"

"Now who's being condescending, Dad? Evy seems to look just fine, maybe a little tired, but still competent to deal with the new turn her life has taken."

"Thanks a bunch, Tom, I knew I could count on you to damn me with faint praise."

"I wasn't doing anything of the kind. I'm a realist, and you do look a little tired—"

"I think she means it sounds rude, Tom. Your sister has earned her stripes this time, so let her alone. When are you going to grow up and give us a grandchild?"

Whoops. Charlie's treading on a sore spot twice over. Not only does Tom look a little put out, well he would, considering that Julia Beth is here and he doesn't want to be

prodded. But Evy glared at me, I could swear she did, when Charlie said "give *us* a grandchild." If there were any way to kick him under the table, I would, but sitting at the opposite end from him, it's impossible to do. And if I frown I might catch someone else's eye too. Better to let well enough alone.

"So, Charlie, are you and Dolly—I'm sorry, Dot, I mean—are you two still keeping Rob and Pam's boy? What's his name?"

I'd better short-circuit Charlie's objection to my "alter ego," as I have come to think of it, seeing as how everyone at the book club calls me "Dot." Or maybe it's the mention of Jeffrey that's making him look like a thundercloud. "His name is Jeffrey, Donald. Yes, we keep him now and then, but he doesn't really require much keeping. He's not a bad boy or anything, in case you were worrying about him and Alice being here on the same day. It might even help him to grow a bit more mature to see a baby and watch it develop and be taken care of."

There goes Evy, snorting. I wonder if she knows how much she sounds like her father, doing that.

"I'm sure that's why we had a baby, to help out Pam and Rob."

My turn to be red in the face. Why is Evy always so combative? "No, dear, I just meant—well, I know Pam and Rob are very busy people, but that boy needs a sibling, a friend, an ally. And even though a baby is too young for that, and it's a girl baby, he needs something softer to help develop his nature. It's a two-way street, after all. Babies will smile and be entertained so easily, by almost everything that goes on around them. Maybe someday a girl or boy like Jeffrey will be helping you by babysitting."

Don's frowning now. It takes a lot of dissension to stir up those mild waters. "Well, I just hope he doesn't deafen her with his weird music. I mean, it's not even heavy metal, it's a lot worse. I really don't like the idea of her hearing that stuff."

"Don't worry, Don, *we* don't even hear it. He wears ear plugs. I think they've grown into his head or something sometimes. No, we've housebroken him a little bit since he first started coming here. We don't have to keep them on the same days necessarily. Just takes a little more planning the other way, that's all."

Why can't they see that when Charlie says that, he's upset over perfect harmony not reigning? He would so much rather that people just got along. He's not really argumentative. But he is rather set on being the leader, the head of the family, at least as regards the respect he expects. My role in the whole thing is so small. I'm at a disadvantage because Evy doesn't like me, and doesn't always care whether she shows it or not. Tom is respectful, and friendly, but I can never be sure what he's thinking about me. I think he's watching Charlie and me to see which way the cat will jump.

"Mr. Canterfield, did you babysit Tom and Evy when they were growing up?" Now, why is Julia Beth speaking up? Right into the middle of contention and mayhem.

"Charlie, dear, call me Charlie. Yes, but we didn't refer to it as babysitting, because after all, I was their father. Oh, not on weekdays, their mother was alive then and kept them when they were small. No nannies or anything like that for us. But I sometimes looked after them on the weekends, or when she had something to do with her girlfriends." He pauses. He looks up, directly at her. Is she trying to act like a lightning rod for some of the tension, or is she just clueless?

She smiles, smoothly, looks down at her plate, then lays her fork down and takes a drink of iced tea. I can feel us all watching her, as if frozen in time. "I just wondered. They seem to show such a marvelous quality of, oh, I don't know, good manners, good breeding as it used to be called, a desire for fair play. Not that I have a right to comment, only having known Tom for such a short time and just having met Evy the other day. But sometimes you can just tell when someone has been properly brought up, you know? It's almost always the influence of the parents, not of nannies or playfellows."

As Charlie would say, if he didn't seem flabbergasted, she's got balls. I wouldn't have opened my mouth to say those things for the world. Yet, everybody's looking more relaxed. I can't make up my mind if Julia Beth is going to be struck by lightning for lying about Evy at least; if she was being ironic at everyone's expense—but no, surely, she wasn't—; if she really means it; or if she's doing what some of my teachers used to do: praising me for having fully developed the qualities that I only had in embryo, to encourage me to develop them. Yes, she got 'round Charlie; he's smiling back at her.

"Well, thank you, Julia Beth, for the compliment, on behalf of myself and my family. I have always tried to take my obligation to bring up civilized children quite seriously."

"No need to thank me for your own good qualities, Mr.—Charlie." She waves a graceful hand at Tom, and says, "Tom, would you please pour me a little more of that iced tea?"

Tom smiles too now, obliges, and everyone, as if by a prearranged signal, stops eating. I guess we're done.

Evy and Julia Beth and I gather up the plates, Evy taking a little detour by the pram to make sure the baby's all right. Charlie goes by it too, seemingly unable to resist touching a small toe. The baby stirs, but stays asleep.

Donald, the model husband, says, "Now, ladies, you can carry the dishes into the kitchen, but since Dot cooked and all three of you arranged the table, I nominate us guys to do the dishes. Go on, Evy, put that stuff down."

Tom goes into the kitchen behind him, and Charlie good-naturedly follows along, even though I suspect he was getting ready to head for his favorite chair. Evy looks vexed, though I don't imagine she really wants to do dishes. Probably it's just that she doesn't like being ordered around, even affectionately. I do hope they don't break anything. Not that the dishes are valuable, but it's just such a mess to clean up. Oh, the baby's crying. Evy picks it up, and throws a clean diaper over her shoulder. She grabs the diaper bag and the bottle full of breast milk, and heads for the rear of the house. I really don't see why she needs seclusion to feed the baby, if she's not baring her breast. But then, maybe it needs changed too. Or maybe she really does need some peace and quiet, like she said. Seven o'clock. I guess I'd better light the smoky candles out on the front porch to drive the bugs away. Oh, yes, and make sure there are enough chairs. Maybe they'll all stay for a while longer. Maybe Evy will mellow out enough, sometime, to let me hold the baby. Julia Beth silently follows me out onto the porch, and when she sees what I'm doing, takes a match or two from the box and lights one of the candles. Yes, she has a touch with Charlie, at least. If Tom marries her, she'll be a sort of daughter-in-law to me. Someone to help me conciliate Evy. Yes, I can see how it might all work out, if things go smoothly.

(Tom, Julia Beth)

"Julia Beth."

"Mmhh."

"Julia Beth." No answer. "Are you asleep?"

A drowsy, throaty laugh. "I was. Why are you—are you—no, I can see you're not. Why are you waking me up again, then? Can't go to sleep?"

"I just wanted to talk. But if you're interested—"

"I'm not entirely uninterested. But I am sleepy. What time is it, anyway? Three o'clock? Oh, Tom." She sighs, and props herself up on one elbow, facing me. "Shall I get us some coffee? Not that battery acid you bought last week, though. I brought along some Paul Newman's. It's a little milder, anyway." Suddenly, she is paying very alert attention to me. She turns up the light from her side. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's not that anything's wrong, really. I just wanted to know something."

She smiles. "We've been exchanging secrets for three weeks now. What haven't I told you that you're curious about?"

"I just wanted to know—well, why you rubbed up to the old man tonight. No, maybe I shouldn't put it that way. *Were* you just flattering him? I mean, Evy and I hadn't been particularly polite to each other, and Evy was aggravating him as usual. And he wasn't in a great mood with me, either. Why did you say how 'well-bred' we all were? If I had been in your position, it would've taken a lot of nerve."

She smiles, but doesn't answer right away. I touch her face, smoothing away the long, chocolate-colored hair from her cheek, and she snuggles up against me. I kiss her

once, gently, but I don't want to be distracted right away. I say, "Trying to change the subject?"

She moves away from me, plumps up her pillow, and sits against it. "No, not at all," she answers. She seems to be thinking. Then she says, "I wasn't really flattering anybody. It's just—there was a tense atmosphere, and the very fact that there was a tense atmosphere told me that you were all trying not to quarrel. There were things you wanted to say, but they only went so far, and no farther. Do you see?" She takes my hand and traces the lines on the palm with one tapered finger.

"I'm not sure. I mean, we *were* quarreling, I thought."

She laughs merrily. "That's not quarreling. You haven't heard quarreling. Tom, my father was a big, burly fireman who drank more than was good for him, and threatened constantly to hit my mother. He did spank us, stopping just short of what could be called beating. My mother didn't nag him, she yelled at him at the top of her lungs and threw dishes at the wall when it suited her. And she was the daughter of a minister. They fought and quarreled and carried on, until my father died in a ladder truck wreck. And then, oddly, my mother seemed to lose the will to live. After he died, she lived another year, dragging around constantly in an old worn-out housecoat, drinking the booze he'd hidden away all over the house. She'd never liked it much before, but she sopped it all up, and when it was gone, she bought more, and she developed diabetes and died of a stroke, one day about a year after I went to college for the first time." She watches me.

"Why didn't you tell me this before? No, I don't mean that, not if it was too personal. I just mean—well, I didn't know." I hardly know whether to touch her again or not, if she might take it as pity. I settle for clasping her upper arm.

"It didn't come up. And I don't mind you knowing, I just didn't want to parade around my troubles the way so many people do these days, using their trials and tribulations as entries into relationships. You know, therapeutic relationships where one partner is always soothing the other. It should be equal, I think, and honest. I didn't want to take advantage of you."

"Wow." I don't know what to say. I could see myself with her, very definitely, for a minute there. Better not say that now, though. It's too soon.

She reaches across and winds her fingers into the hairs on my chest. "Still want to jump my bones?"

I don't need to think about that too long, at least. Yeah, I guess Dad does have an instinct, a sort of honesty meter, which I should rely on more often. He liked her, for sure, and Dot had a thoughtful, pleasant expression on her face when she looked at her. And I, I definitely like her, too.

"Yes, I think I do. In fact, I'm sure of it."

(Dot and the lit. club)

What a night! Nearly everyone had poems to read tonight, and I thought at one point that we were going to have an outright fight between Fay and Melena. But I'm getting ahead of myself, oh private journal! First of all, and almost as if by prearranged signal, Jimmy was nominated to read his. He had two, but the first was very short, so they called on him to read the second one as well. We had all made copies to be picked up at the end, as agreed upon several weeks ago, so I here append the poems as they were read.

Jimmy's first poem:

Picasso

To beautiful women he said
I can make love to anything human
To ugly women
Your beauty is too inhumanely strange
For me to attempt.

Since none of us knew as much about Picasso as Jimmy did, there wasn't much enlightened discussion, but after trying without stepping on any toes to explain the connection between painting women and making love to them, Jimmy good-naturedly put the poem by and said he had another one, which was at least on a literary topic. Jimmy's second poem, which he said was inspired in part by Shakespeare's *King Henry the Fifth*, ran thus:

The Players (Male and Female)

I remember, my friend
When the world was still a breachable defense
And we, once more unto it,
Were likely to stumble through
With credit
On any saintly day

Proposed to us.
And then there was more
Fighting and talking
And talking and fighting
(As any good undergraduate class could tell us)
And we emerged into our respective victories
Which were a little like birth and a little like death.
Compromising and courting foreign interests
Had never been our strong point
But we learned nearly as handily
As we had fought
With interests not perhaps as foreign
As all that,
So where, then, was the challenge?
You and I, we were ourselves our challenge
Though now we are old and afraid,
Seeking each other's counsel and likely to fail
Because at last
Our script has run out.

We talked about *Henry the Fifth* for a long time, until the break nearly, because first of all, Anne, Jimmy's sister, challenged the last few lines, and pointed out that Jimmy isn't old enough to get by with writing a poem about age. He maintained that it was a matter of feeling, not of years. Then other people jumped in with various questions about some of the lines, which came about in my opinion because once again, Jimmy had picked a topic that we weren't as familiar with as we should be, considering how many former Liberal Arts or English majors were there. There was also some remark (which, however, was made at the very end of his reading) because only Jimmy had given titles to both his poems. Everyone else's, including mine, were untitled.

There was one about a tree, which I didn't especially like, but it was Anne's, and I do like her, so I include it here:

The tree stands tall,
And I above it, looking down,
And I below it, looking up
Re-structure my world

By comparison with the tree
Measuring immeasurable things
Looking for reference
In a place where I find none
After all, it is only a tree.
I try to think what it shares
With me,
And stumble upon only
Our fragility as concepts:
Woman; tree.
Together but not together
We stand
My standing full of meaning
Because I could choose
To sit
The tree's standing
All it knows, if it knows anything,
Except the life of a seed and seedling.
That I am variety
I want to proclaim
Yet my actions
Like the tree's swaying in breezes
May be sheerly fortuitous
Yet even if I live in error
As a state of mind
I try to insist that it is self-generated
And not the result
Of outside forces.
As a character, I insist, I can be seen
Whereas the tree
Is only setting, background,
Toothpick at my will
Or someone's like mine ,
Also a sharp customer,
Another user of our planet.
Our planet?
Surely, though, it stops somewhere,
My stately exaggeration
My claim, my height
Below the tree
Above the tree
Beside the tree
What am I anyway,
Without the tree?
A self-referential entity
Trying for freedom

But lacking
A dramatic captor.

Nobody said much about the poem, but at least that juvenile tendency to praise insincerely and pass on didn't occur. I can remember being made intensely uncomfortable by that sort of thing years ago, when I was in school, by people who replaced helpful criticism or insightful remarks or at least spot-on praise, with false praise. I didn't want to read right away, and as it turned out, it wasn't necessary, because a woman who has never said much of anything, I think her name is Maria, or Mary something, read a very angry poem which made everyone really notice her for the first time. I was dying of curiosity as to whom she was writing to after she finished, but of course one can't ask that without knowing the person much better. It's some man, evidently, that she knew a long time ago. A couple of the women clustered around her when everyone left, wanting to get down to a good gossip about it, I think, but I just couldn't bring myself to be that low down:

I want to have something to say to you
When next we meet again
I want to make light of our separation
And mock other encounters as light,
Yet not so light that you can disregard them.
Only, with a touch, I wish to dispel
The rumor of your heart
That tells you I feel incomplete
Without you.
For you may plump yourself up,
Think of yourself as the answer
To my problems,
But an answer you do not intend
to give.

I want to have something to deny you
When I see your eyes
Eyes beady with suspicion
Without being small.

I used not to look like you
Was generous of heart
Yet now my eyes
Are small and beady too
With the same affliction
The supposition
That someone
Is up to something
In every quarter
Of the globe
That no one
Has a free hand
Or an open heart.

I want most of all to astound you
To move you
To cause you to have no recourse
But to salute me, to confirm me
To see things my way.
I want, that is, to win your heart
And throw it away
With the same careless abandon
And careful calculation
You showed me at my downfall
Over you.
So small a feat perhaps, so large a cost,
For paying pipers has become our mutual theme.

I want to wreck your peace of mind
To keep you up of nights
You rubbing your now grizzled locks
Or perhaps your old bald pate
And asking yourself how it could be
After all these years
That I still have the nerve
To challenge your conscience
To make you feel put upon
Without an outlet
Without a space to think
Without me to make you whole.

And I ask myself:
Can love do all this?
Can I compass it? Will it happen?
Will it do?
And I answer:

It has before.
I know.

Jimmy pointed out that none of us yet had produced anything rhymed, and not really any blank verse either, and wondered if this was the effect of us only having read prose in the club so far. I almost was tempted to read my poem to him, but I knew that if I did he would figure it out, and I was afraid he wasn't the only one. I mean, I knew I would blush, or look at him without intending to, and so help me God, I didn't want to start any sort of flirtation under Charlie's nose, however flattering it might be to my ego. Besides, though this is a minor point, I hadn't made copies of it. So I just sat there, and saved my long poem for a while, considering that as so many people were writing and reading long, rhetorical sorts of poems that night that there probably wouldn't be time for mine anyway. But as long as it had seemed, we still had forty-five minutes of the two hours to go, when Melena suddenly volunteered to read a poem. She started by mentioning *bricolage*, she said "since the idea is at the heart of my poem," and I think we all saw Fay tense up, but no one was sure why. "I do feel sorry for myself," said Melena, which didn't make sense until she after read the poem, and then she explained that *bricolage* was the use of something in a creative way, in a way for which it was not originally intended.

I've had a long life
Of feeling sorry for myself
I've made a career
Of complaining
And poetry will do me as well
As anything else,
The use of a scalpel
Turned to the use
Of a hammer.
My language breaks off
Becomes blunted and dulled,
Looks unlike itself
And bricolage

Has here been stupid,
A foolish waste of space
and time and energy.
Yet still I look at the thing
Its fine point lost
Or its efficient grip cast aside,
One piece or the other,
I can't have both
But remain suspended
Between the fragments
Of unrecovered satiric edge
And governed grasp aimed
toward solid solemnity.

Suddenly, in what was intended to be a quiet whisper, but what sounded quite clearly for everyone's ears in the silence while we were trying to work out what exactly the poem was getting at, Fay said, angrily, "I never said your poetry was foolish or a waste. I just said—"

"You said I felt sorry for myself," responded Melena, quite audibly. They glared at each other for a second or two, then Melena picked herself up in the air as if planning to go out the door, moved a full seat further away from Fay, on the couch where the two of them always sit with their heads together, and plopped back down.

Fay turned pale; I've heard that said before, but never really seen it. People usually turn red when they're mad or upset. Then, in a sort of muffled tone, which changed to a challenging one as she began to read, she said, "Okay, me now. I've got a poem. Shorter than some other people's." She looked around the circle, and since no one answered her back, started to read:

Words have not moved you
Yet words are all I have
A landscape of words
Lies between us.
Where would I be
In this landscape of words

Hearing what mute exchanges
Had I been likewise mute?
You are stubborn and hard
Not given to the personal word
Except in retaliation
For imagined slights
Or for unintended ones.
It's a real question
What I could do
To placate you
Other than falling as mute
As a stone
As deep as a stone in a well
Cast for curiosity's sake
In a well that only allows
The echo to escape
When what is at stake
Is no more than a casual interest.
Do I seem casual to you?
Only curious?
No, for I wrest every response
Every word from you
The more as it becomes certain
And clear
That you no longer love.

"All right, Fay, all right, if that's the way you want it," Melena's voice was nearly a shriek. "I've got another poem, a *long* one this time, and anyone who doesn't want to hear it can just—can just—anyway, here it is." And she launched into a poem which at least elucidated some of the points of contention between them. That is, if Fay is the "she" speaker of the poem and Melena is the initially unacknowledged one. And she was right, it was really long, at least for those of us watching the two of them and wondering if this was going to go on all night. I caught myself stealing glances at their notebooks and papers to see if they had by chance both come well-stocked for battle, or something, but it was impossible to tell. It almost seemed like a very personal poetry slam:

He's a tease, she said.
Better leave him alone.

He'll break your heart.
--Who was it who said
The heart wants what the heart wants?
Practically everybody, she said.
--That's not the point.
You'll be sorry, is the point.
Men don't have soft hearts.
They don't give and give and give
Like we do.
--Sometimes we take and take,
--when we nag and cajole—
Stop right there.
You're buying into their fiction, she said.
--What fiction? People are people.
--People are different.
--I've known men to bitch and carp.
But you said women did that.
--Women do, men do.
Are you trying to say
We're the same
Or different? she asked.
--What are you trying to say?
That you should avoid him.
--Just him? Or all men?
What are you asking me?
--What are you saying?
Well, I think women are better off
By themselves.
--Surely to god no human creature
--is better off totally alone.
I didn't say totally alone, she said.
--But...
You lack imagination, she said wryly.
--No, I just lack him.
What's wrong with a woman? she asked.
--What? What woman?
--What are you talking about?
I guess you'll never know, she said.
--I don't lack imagination, I said.
--Just that power of it
--Which seeks myself
--Instead of the other.
That's not what it's about, she said.
--I can only say what it's about to me, I said,
--And that's my perspective,
--My imagination.

Women with women
And men with men
Are smarter than other people
She said.
--I can't believe I'm hearing that.
Why not?
--Because it's not true,
--How can any group of people
--Be smarter because of something
--Like which other people
--They love?
All the same, it's true.
I believe it's true.
--I don't believe you can believe it.
--Listen, I've got to go,
--He's going to call,
--He said he's going to call.
How many times has that happened?
--Look, even if you were right about him,
--Which I don't think is true,
--That doesn't mean you're right
--About every man.
It's an ugly little subject, I guess, she said.
--You're right about that, I said.
--We don't disagree about much.
For friends, we live wide apart.
--We're friends, that's the important thing.
If you say so, she said.

Everybody was looking at their feet or laps or hands when the last line came; no one was expecting it, and I think we were all dreading it was going to go on forever. Jimmy cleared his throat as if he were about to say something, but Anne shook her head at him, at about the same time that Fay found her voice, such as it was. She was red now, but said in an acid little tone to Melena, "Since when did recording private conversations become a way of writing poetry?"

Melena tossed her head and didn't answer. I have never actually seen anyone toss her head like that, even though it's always a gesture of, I don't know, I guess defiance, in books. No one said anything for what seemed like a full five minutes, but was probably

not even really one, then Beatrice, whose house we meet at, looked carefully around the circle, smiling tentatively.

Though I didn't intend it at this point, not knowing what might happen if anyone spoke "out of turn," as we used to say, she happened to catch my eye, and said, "Dot, do you have anything for us this week?" She peeked at her watch and smiled at me again, and said, "Only if you want to read. We have about another five minutes or so. And remember, people, next week we don't meet: it's Fourth of July week. After that, we've agreed to read, or re-read, *The Great Gatsby*. But you know," she appeared to be thinking a minute, "as Jimmy noticed, none of us have attempted rhyme or even blank verse so far. Maybe we should also be thinking, at least for the future, of some—" she paused—"of some more traditional kinds of poetry we want to read together." Her voice was very calm and controlled, and everyone, as far as I dared to look, was looking at her. "Just for the practice. Now—Dot, did you want to read, or shall we break for the evening?"

I blurted out, as had seemingly become the fashion for the evening, "It's a bit longer than a page." I looked at her. She nodded encouragingly, and crossed her fingers on top of her knee as if she had another century to listen. I happened to glance up at Jimmy, and he grinned very slightly and winked. So I read it. At least, I can tell myself, it had some literary references in it like Jimmy used, even if it wasn't as good as his.

I woke up and saw myself on a path
Just beyond where
Two roads converged in a wood.
Dante's selva selvaggia
E aspra e forte
Where Frost and his funny defiance of fate
Had tried to make all the difference.
And encountering something twice

Not three times
Not the *lonza* of lust
Nor the *leone* of pride
Nor the *lupa* of envy
But just the two roads
Materialized behind me,
I reversed direction
To see where I'd been.
And twice with almost vatic clarity
There occurred postulate visions of the past
One the knowledge that early loss of a father
Had ruined my life and constrained my choices
Converging after a day or two
With the knowledge
That I had done nothing grand
With what was left after the death
But one life, encapsuled, for which I longed
Instead had already passed me by
Where I still stood
Asking to live it over again
Or another and better
And that I stood here, near the end
Wondering how I had managed
To walk both paths at once,
Both the path of the pawn of fate,
And the path
Of mature womanhood,
Who could have made a choice
Who somehow should
Have made a choice
Who should have been aware
And been otherwise,
Not divided.
So what then of the third thing?
We all know encounters come in threes.
But perhaps I have been fortunate
And got my understanding easily,
The meaning of this solitary path
I have turned again now
To make through the wood
All lust and pride and envy
On my back like a garment
Made of my human qualities
To protect me from
Dickinson's knowledge
Of partings,

Of heaven and hell.

I still think there are serious problems with that poem; for one thing, it was from before I met Charlie and was getting a little depressed and sorry for myself, I guess like Melena (and what about her quarreling with Fay over a man! I thought they were birds of a feather, so to speak! But poor Fay, I hope she doesn't stop coming to the lit. club. For one thing, even though the two of them sometimes talk over my head, I like better to learn things than to always know the answers, and they are full of literary stuff). But almost as soon as I finished reading, everyone started clapping! I wish I knew who started it. Most likely, it was Jimmy or Beatrice, trying to bridge the gap between awkward silence and time to go. Playing into the nervous feeling in the room, I guess, that people had to have something to do with their hands. I said, "It's not quite fair, it's sort of a cheat. I wrote the poem more than a year ago, and have just tinkered with it a little since." But people smiled at me, and nodded. I didn't dare say anything about how morose it seems to me now, not wanting to bring up a topic that might get attention back to the sorry little quarrel (big quarrel!) we all had been witness to. Then everyone seemed by common consent to start putting on their summer sweaters and jackets, which the cool evening had occasioned, and Beatrice's husband Peter poked in his head from the kitchen, where he had come in sometime just before the end, I guess. I do remember hearing a door, but can't for the life of me remember, in all the heightened tension of the evening, when it was.

Beatrice was her usual self, a bit more soothing, if anything, and touched each of us gently on the arm as we went past her, through the door. You wouldn't know that anything had happened, except for the fact that Fay and Melena, usually the last out the

door, and usually laughing and chatting happily with Beatrice and her husband, were neither of them anywhere to be seen (I wonder how Fay reconciles her apparent feeling of suspicion against all men with her obvious liking for Peter, and Beatrice?). Jimmy seemed to want to talk, but I saw Charlie's car parked where he let me off earlier on his way to the store, and as politely as possible I cut it short. I waved in a general way over my shoulder, which Jimmy could interpret as he saw fit, and then there was the car, and Charlie leaning over to open the door, and saying, "Well, and how did it go, old girl?" He calls me that when he's joking, and I guess I don't mind it. I thought any discussion of what had happened had better be saved for another time, but I was still a little dazed at the reception my poem had gotten, even if it was only a result of group tension, and I said, "Oh Charlie, they clapped for me!" and Charlie patted my knee and said, "That's my girl!"

(Julia Beth, Tom)

"Did you get me some kettle-fried chips? Did they have them?"

He met me at the rear of the station wagon and opened the trunk for us to put in the groceries. It's going to be quite a weekend, with my getting caught up on my correspondence for the theatre association and his doing the cooking. But Tom's a good cook, so my doing the shopping for him was a fair trade.

"Of course they had them, you foolish man. They always have the things in abundance that aren't good for you." I must have been quieter than I thought I was being, though, because he kept looking at me sideways as we pulled out of the parking lot.

"What are you looking back at? See somebody you like better than me?" I guess I didn't answer quickly enough; he frowned into the rear-view mirror, and said "Julia B., my dear, that's the sort of question that's supposed to be answered right away."

He grinned, though, and I hesitated, not knowing quite what I was feeling wary of. I mean, I knew, but still I didn't know if there was really any point in bringing it up. I hate gossip.

"Oh," I said lightly, "I thought I saw Evy in one of the aisles. You know, the one where the baby food is."

"And? I mean, my sister's not really all *that* thought-provoking, is she? Did she speak?"

"No." I hoped that would quell it, but he laughed outright.

"Typical Evy. Even if she likes you, she's wrapped up in her own world, doesn't see a soul. Did she have Alice with her?"

"Yes, I think so. She had a car seat in the top of her buggy, and even though I couldn't see the baby from where I was, there would be no point in carrying it in empty. Unless Donald was with her and had the baby in the car, for some reason. But no, then she wouldn't carry around the empty car seat. Anyway," I tried to put it as delicately as possible, "I think she was preoccupied with a friend of hers who was making much of the new member of the family."

"Oh, yeah? What'd she look like? Maybe it's someone I know. If she had carrot red hair about down to her waist, it's her friend Angela."

"No, it was a man. I've never seen him before. Probably someone she works with or something."

"A man? She doesn't work with any men. Other than Donald, I mean. A man. What'd he look like?"

"Oh, I don't know, a suit, snappy dresser, blackish hair, I couldn't see his eyes. Taller than she is by about a head. Oh, and he had some sort of accent, I could hear him talking as I passed the aisle. His voice lilted, but I didn't hear what he said." I waited a minute, hoping to distract him, then said, "I was on my quest for your kettle-chips, dearie. I wish you joy of them, they're going to make you old and sick before your time."

"Nonsense," he said, "one bag of chips is only one bag of chips."

"I imagine you've had more than enough. Anyway, at least you're cooking healthy this weekend. It doesn't really take any longer than cooking and eating junk. And it's simpler."

"Am I disagreeing? I dragged out lots of my whole earth and veggie recipes, just for you."

"And I appreciate it. Maybe another weekend it'll be my turn." I grinned at him now, confident that I had put negative thoughts about Evy out of his head, if in fact they had ever been there. "I suppose you'll demand barbeque and sloppy joes."

"I will demand nothing untoward, but be receptive of all." He waved a hand grandly, and turned onto Lacy Gorge Boulevard, onto the four-lane.

We continued to josh and jest for the rest of the evening, but I had to be careful not to appear distracted or silent, because Tom is very quick to pick up on moods. I don't know exactly what sorts of things had set off alarm bells in my head, except that Evy had seemed like the sort of woman not to have a single male in her life other than family and family friends, and the man with her had been bending over her and the baby in a certain manner, something that made him look more like a proud, if slightly ridiculous, admirer of his own offspring. As if he was playing a role. And Evy's face had been bright pink, which of course could have been from pleasure at hearing a friend praise the baby fulsomely, only...I just don't know, and there's no point in bringing it up with Tom again. It's quite possibly just my evil imagination, thinking that I see in front of me the sort of thing I once got involved in, though on the other side of the equation, being involved with a man who said he was getting a divorce and then didn't. Tom knows about that, of course, but doesn't seem really to see his sister as a woman, as a fellow woman might see her. Well, of course, that's normal, she's his sister, after all. It's up to Donald to be aware of her needs and courses of action, and it's none of my business. I think I have the normal quotient of curiosity, but I do believe there are some things I wish I had never seen, and this was one of them. It's probably selfish of me, too, because I can't help but

think that any ripple of distress in the Canterfield family may affect me and Tom. Maybe it's better not to think of it.

(Dot)

Today I saw Melena with a guy who must be "the man in the case" she and Fay aired so tortuously a few weeks ago. She didn't see me at first, or at least I hoped she didn't, because I must confess that my ears were flapping as she and he passed at their nearest point and I'm sure I was staring. I don't know what I expected, or if I really expected anything, but she was totally taken up, apparently, with her "friend." I'm rather naïve, I suppose, about just what constitutes lesbian relationships, only having known a few gay women in my courses in college. Kids now grow up knowing that there can be different preferences. And of course, people didn't discuss things like that when I was really young as they do now, certain things were just assumed: if you didn't have a man, weren't pursuing or being pursued by men, and if you were not feminine-minded at least in your habits if not in your appearance, there was a certain amount of bitchery aimed at you in private by others. Maybe no one said anything to you directly, but the gossip was still there, ever present behind the scenes. Still, in a way people were more tolerant of two women living together, or perhaps they were just naïve, too. They would have been far less tolerant of two men living together, for example, unless they were related.

Their encounter took place at Paul's Café and Deli on Sutter Street, where I was already sitting in a corner by myself trying to think of another rhyming poem before it was time to go home and eat the dinner Charlie had insisted on preparing. I'll say this for him, he does more than his share of chores, considering that I am really in a way his dependent. My coffee had gotten cold, and I was just preparing to go to the counter and get my free warm-up when I saw Melena and the man coming in the door. They were

very touchy-feely, and went immediately up to the front counter, so I decided in the interests of tactfulness (and curiosity) not to speak at first. I looked down at what I was doing while they ordered and paid, and only looked up later when they were seated. They were sitting, though, in a spot that was advantageous to me, because Melena had her back to me entirely, and had the counter to her far right, and I could see what her choice of companion amounted to, at least as far as you can judge by appearances. She was small and delicately built by comparison with him; he was a tall, stocky sort of man in his late thirties or so, with deep auburn wavy hair, a dimple in his chin, and a funny quirky way of grinning. He seemed to be focussing all his attention on her alone as long as she was meeting his glance, but anytime she looked away, his eyes darted around the room rapidly, as if in search of someone or something. I really hoped he wasn't cheating on her, especially after she risked her close friendship with Fay over him. If he was in fact the same man. Dear me, I guess that's the way, after all, that gossip gets started. I saw so-and-so in such-and-such a place with some other so-and-so, and then we're off and running, as Charlie says.

It was useless then to try and write poetry, even though the room was fairly large and Melena had shown no signs of noticing me there. I thought she probably wouldn't come and talk anyway, because after a few minutes they put their heads closely together and became engaged in what appeared to be a serious and intense conversation. She was gesturing freely, with some emphasis and exasperation, though not apparently at him. He kept patting her arm, and then they held hands for a while in between sips of coffee, or in his case, espresso. I don't know what it is about a man who drinks lots of espresso that doesn't sit well with me, but when I saw him sipping out of that tiny little cup, while

Melena drank some iced beverage or other, I felt sure that Fay must be partly right about some element of dishonesty in him. There again, gossip, because of course there was no way I could be sure that he was even the same man as Melena had written about in her poem, especially not since the very lines in the poem itself helped raise a doubt in the reader's mind that the man was not a nice one who called when he was supposed to. Since Melena had written it, she was apparently aware of some truth to Fay's suspicion of him; the poem seemed to be almost evenly divided between two different perspectives. I therefore had nothing to go upon, just my nosiness. I wondered if he had ever met Fay, and if maybe Melena was airing her grievances about Fay with him, just as, in a very peculiar way, she had been airing her grievance about him, if she had one, in the poem she read.

I waited for them to do something else more interesting, but they had settled down into a cozy little world for two, and nothing else seemed to mean anything to them. Except, of course, for his nervous glancing around the room from time to time. I didn't have a favorable impression of him as first impressions go, but I wondered even at the time if it was because I had gotten used to the idea of Fay and Melena together in a similar sort of relationship. They had seemed so perfectly suited to each other, laughing together, making obscure literary jokes that the rest of us, at least some of us, had to have explained, arriving and leaving at the lit. club at the same time.

I remember in college I knew a lesbian who lived in a household of other gay women, and she told me that one woman was in danger of being evicted because one of her fellow housemates had entered her room without warning and found a diaphragm, gel, and birth control pamphlets on her desk, all brand new. The women had all become very upset,

partly because they were afraid that she meant to bring a man into the house to her room, and they weren't in a tolerant mood. Also, since they wanted to keep the household one where gay and feminist women alone were welcome, they wondered if she had misled them from the beginning and only said she was a lesbian to get house room on a full campus. Things were different then. Now, from what I've read, men can claim to be feminists too, and the literary expression "queer theory," at least according to Fay at one of the meetings, is not just for gay people, but embodies the idea of a spectrum of sexual responses, mores, and attitudes, all the way from one extreme to the other: gender studies, in fact. Still, I myself remain fairly timid, and feel that if I don't want to be misunderstood, I should probably not raise such questions with people of simpler perspective, like Charlie. And I guess I too am a person of fairly simple perspective.

I gathered up my things and finished what had become for the second time my cold coffee. I was just getting up to go when I looked up and saw them heading out the door. I regretted for a moment that I hadn't gone over to say hello and been introduced, but while I still had my eye on them, Melena looked over at me, smiled, and waved. She seemed very friendly. I waved back. Obviously then, she had appreciated my restraint, or so it seemed. I smiled and waved back, watching them leave, the man at the curb before her opening the passenger door of a red sports car of some kind. Charlie always jokes about my ignorance of cars, but I could see that it was an expensive one even from the front counter, where I was buying a piece of chocolate and stalling for time to allow them to leave. The auburn-haired man wasn't opening the door for Melena, however, he was getting into the car himself. She went around to the driver's side after waiting for a car to pass, and held her hand out. He passed across something, which seemed to be the

keys, and she revved up the engine as loudly as it would go and sped out, apparently without looking behind her. If that's how she drove what appeared to be his car, no wonder the man was nervous! But no, his nervousness had appeared to be some kind of social thing, almost as if he was afraid to be seen with her. I wondered again if he was married or otherwise committed. I hadn't seen a ring, but then I had been a little far away for that.

It was really odd, the way I felt after seeing them. There they were, to all intents and purposes carrying on a hot affair of some kind, and I was having coffee by myself, as if no one else understood me, and going tamely home to Charlie and what was probably tuna casserole. If it was envy, I couldn't think why. I knew logically that Charlie was all that was sane and healthy; I knew he would never cheat on me. And it's not as if he left anything to be desired in the bedroom department: Charlie keeps himself in good shape, and I have nothing to complain of in that way. But there's something about being young and in love, or maybe just about being in that first careless abandon of any affair, and Charlie and I are past that now.

I tried to get Charlie interested in going out for coffee there, but he went once and then said, "Dolly, my dear, why should I go and pay to drink hot mud out of the bottom of my cup when I can have a perfectly fine cup of coffee at home, where it doesn't cost an arm and a leg? If you want to go out for coffee, why don't we go out for breakfast sometime at Ainsley's Diner? They do a mean breakfast, and they keep hot fresh coffee coming all day long." There was no way I could explain that I wanted to see strange faces, have a sense of adventure, a piece of too-expensive lemon square and a cappuccino, instead of seeing so many of the people we already know and others like them. I miss being young,

and Charlie just *is* young, young still. There are times when I think that if I were more adventurous, Charlie and I wouldn't really be compatible. But no, that's not right, because I really do love him and want to grow old with him. Just not yet.

(Charlie, Tom, Dot)

"Well, Tom, and what are you up to today?"

"Just coming by, Dad, to see if you need anything, you or Dot. Julia Beth and I are going out of town this weekend, and I didn't want to leave you in the lurch. You know, just in case there was anything."

"I appreciate the thought, son, but you and Evy seem to be determined to put me in the 'dopey old man' category a little soon, don't you think? Why, already today I've made breakfast for us old folks, mowed the lawn, repaired the cane to the rocking chair, and shined my good shoes. I'm not really sure what for, I mean about the shoes, Dolly and I haven't been anywhere fancy for a while now, but I guess it doesn't hurt. So, you see, I'm perfectly all right. Nice of you to ask, though. Where are you off to, or is it a secret?"

"We're going up to that resort on the river in Holderston for a couple of days. Swimming, boating, fishing, you know the sort of thing. Little cabins and stuff."

"And who's minding the bookstore while you're away? I hope you've got someone you can trust."

"Dan Greene, Dad. Remember, you met him at Evy's wedding years ago."

"Oh, yeah, I know his folks. His great-uncle used to live near your mother and me when we were first married. Good people. You haven't brought your girl around for a while."

"She's been really busy managing RTA, Dad. It's summer stock time, you know."

"RTA? Is that that theatre thing?"

"Regional Theatre Association, Dad, yes. Sometimes I don't see her for a day or two at a time."

"I'm surprised that she hasn't been here so often lately. She was really taking a shine to us for a while there."

"Yeah, she really likes you two."

"I know exactly why, too. Stroking the cow to get the calf."

"Dad! You know that's not true! She really likes you guys! She's just busy, is all. And I'm not sure I appreciate being referred to as a calf."

"That's what you are, though, Tom. That's what we all are, once women get a hold of us. A bunch of howling, bawling calves, just waiting to be branded." I took a good look at him to see if he was serious, but he was grinning very slightly, and looking up at me with an odd, shy, Sunday-school expression on, that's the only way I can describe it. I noticed that his unruly hair was slicked down and he had on what looked like a new shirt, and a new belt to his blue jeans.

"All right, Dad, what's up with *you*? Is Dot writing more poems? You haven't been looking again, have you?"

"Shh! She's in the kitchen, but women have a way of creeping around on those tiny little feet of theirs and hearing things not meant for them." He was laughing hard now, but silently. I couldn't think what had gotten into him. He was being very mischievous: Dot has a size eight foot at least.

"Dad!"

"Well, the long and the short of it is, that I asked Dolly in formal terms to marry me, and she turned about forty shades of pink, and I could tell, mind you, that she was going

to say yes, but being a woman, she had to go and put conditions on it. I don't imagine she means to hold me to it, but she said she would seriously consider it if I would take her once a week—although I negotiated for now and then, indefinite, you see—to that fancy café uptown, what's it called? Deli and Café, something."

"Paul's Café and Deli?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Horrible coffee, stale pastry. Nice jazz on the speakers, though. But jazz isn't everything. I can't imagine what she sees in that place. When I asked her why, she said it keeps her feeling young. I can't see why watching me perch in an uncomfortable chair that's too small for anyone's bottom should get her going, but your mother sometimes took funny notions like that. Had to have this special honey lotion for her skin, cost a pretty penny, too. Why is it they always like things that are too expensive and have no real use?"

"Dad, if anyone will be able to answer that question, I expect you will."

"Nope, this is the last time for me, I hope and trust. I'm not going to be repeating the experiment again just to find out."

"Well, at least you'll have somewhere to wear your newly shined shoes. When's the wedding to be?"

"We don't have it settled just yet, and I won't be wearing the old standbys, I don't imagine. Everything's got to be new, you know how it is. Starting out all over again, and all that. Not but what I expect to get a lot of wear out of them still."

All of a sudden, I heard a sound inside, and then I saw Dot at the door. Her face bloomed with welcome, and she said "Well, hello, Tom, how are you? How's everything? Can I get you some iced tea, or maybe some limeade? We've got both."

"No, thank you, I'm all set. You're spoiling him, Dot, he should be on bread and water."

"No, really, he's spoiling me." She hesitated a second, looked at him, and then as if reassured by his quizzical smile, "Have you heard our news?"

"You mean about the two of you tying the knot? Yes, Dad was just telling me. I certainly wish you happy, Dot, the both of you."

"Thank you, Tom. I'm sure we'll be happy. Your dad is a good man, a very good man, and I'm a lucky woman." Then, just as suddenly as she had appeared, her face wrinkled up with an impromptu tearfall, and she ran back into the house, sniffing and clearing her throat.

I looked at him. He shrugged and shook his head. "Don't ask me, Tom. It's been off and on for a few days now. Just like a spigot. Sun and rain, sun and rain. She says there's nothing wrong, she's just happy, but if I didn't know better...well, I would assume a few things. First of all, it may be that she's at a certain time of life, if you follow my drift. Then, she seemed very serious about that café thing, but I know better than to think that she's got anything on with someone else there. But trying to get me to like that place is really trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, as they say. Then, she—well, to be perfectly honest, my lad, she picks funny times and places for little—you know, rendezvous. That's the word, isn't it?"

"If by that you mean love-making—"

"All right, Tom, no need to be, well, to be—"

"Yes, Dad, that's the word. You don't mean out in public or anything, do you?"

"No, of course not! But there's such a thing as a comfortable time and place, and lately—parts of me are sore that have never been sore before, muscles I didn't know I had, if you see what I mean. Not that I don't appreciate a change now and then, but when I think back on my younger days, I might've proposed to women more often if I had known what they would get up to. Probably just as well that I didn't."

"She must really love you and want to marry you, Dad. That's the conclusion I would draw."

"I guess so. And when I think about how long I worried and agonized as to whether or not it would work out...."

"See, you worried for nothing! Well, that's wonderful news, Dad. I can't wait to tell Julia Beth. I can bring her to the wedding, can't I?"

"Of course you can, Tom. Might as well give them all ideas at the same time, hadn't we?"

"Have you told Evy and Donald yet?"

"No, and that's another thing. I'm a little worried about your sister."

"What's she done now, Dad? I thought with a new baby and Donald and all she has to do she would be too busy to annoy you."

"She doesn't annoy me at all, my boy, that's the problem. At first, she very cautiously allowed us to keep the baby about once a week. Then, she decided to go back to work, and decided we could keep the baby twice a week, while her nanny was off. We do, but we see precious little of Evy. She doesn't come by the way she used to, she doesn't fuss at me, doesn't seem even to have the heart in her to snub Dolly, though of course I should

be glad that's changed. I can't think what's got into her. Is it that new mother thing, do you think?"

"Postpartum depression? I guess it could be. Does she do anything really weird, seem to resent the baby, or seem depressed, tired out a lot, anything like that?"

"No, on the contrary, she seems in the pink of health. Of course, not every new mother has both a nanny and her own folks to help keep her baby. It's not that she's sad, just that she seems absent-minded, and—well, unlike Evy. Well, you know how direct Evy's always been, right up front with everything she has to say. Now, it's as if she's hiding some of what she thinks, getting tactful all of a sudden. I just don't know what's going on with her."

"Want my advice, Dad? Don't worry about it. I'm sure it'll work itself out in time. Before you know it Evy will be training the baby to look at you in that disapproving tone of voice of hers."

"That might almost relieve my mind."

"Don't borrow trouble, Dad, like you used to tell us. I've got to run now, got two hours to pack before Julia Beth gets home, I mean—"

"Gets home? Is she living with you now?"

"Sort of off and on, Dad, we haven't really made any hard and fast rules yet. Don't worry, you'll be the first to know. See you soon."

"Yes, Tom, have a good time."

"I will. I love you, Dad."

"Well, that goes for me too, Tom. You're a fine boy, a fine man. I'm very proud of you. Take care."

(Jeffrey)

Saw that lady Evy, the one that brings the stupid baby, out with this guy the other day. I was skateboarding down Main Street, on my way to old man Canterfield's, when she stepped out of a dress shop with him. I can't see why the fuck I can skateboard halfway across town to go to a babysitter's, but can't stay by myself. I was right behind them when the guy grabbed her arm like he thought I was going to run into her, and pulled her up against him. Got to remember that, in case I ever want to hit on a girl. I did have my iPod in, but I was jumping the curb right then, and I've never run into anybody yet. Anyways, she looked around, and when she saw me, she got a really funny look on her face. He said a bunch of words at me, didn't even sound like English, and then I was past them and on my way. He's probably some sort of dress designer, or interior decorator, or something. If he hadn't been grabbing for her like that, I'd have thought he was a real faggot.

I don't guess she really looked like she was doing him or anything, just like she was afraid I might *think* she was doing him. But why should the bitch care what *I* think? Unless she's afraid I'm going to tell somebody else. Yeah, that would be a real bomb to let off under old Canterfield: your daughter's screwing a guy who's not her husband. Her husband is one of these all proper suity types, runs a travel agency. Looks like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, like Canterfield said about that snotty mailman. Sometimes the husband drops the baby off, probably when she's getting measured for dresses with her special friend. I've heard Mom talk about dresses till I could gag, and she always wants to go look in that shop, even though she almost never gets a dress made. Seems

they sometimes have things returned that are put on the rack. Dad has the money, but Mom always asks me if I want to go to college or not when I point that out, like she's answering her own question. How the hell do I know? I've never been to college. I guess my grades are good enough, at least for somewhere like Ranelagh Community, and anyways I don't want to work too much. Just enough to get by, so's I can play video games, skateboard, watch television, rock climb, stuff like that. Maybe sometime I'll get married, but girls all dress in pink, and cry and giggle, and get makeup on you if they get too close, and I want a different kind of girl. Sort of like Anna Allen, that new girl in my algebra class. She's really the best kind. She's so quiet and cultured-like, and the only time I ever saw her get even a little upset was when she got that algebra problem wrong.

I saw her one day in the cafeteria, playing some sort of game on her phone, and when she saw me, she smiled. She speaks to me now when she sees me, but I can't ever think of much to say. Man, I bet we could be great together. And she's really good on the volleyball and basketball courts too, I've seen her over on the girl's side. But she doesn't seem to want to hang with the popular girls, even though they all pick her, now that they know how well she plays. And she doesn't dress weird, or anything; she wears blue jeans most of the time or nice pants and a tee-shirt or blouse. She just seems always the same as ever. Yeah, I could marry her.

(Evy, Blaise, etc.)

I feel confused. Blaise seems like a friend, but he keeps touching me in ways—well, for example the other day. It's proprietorial, almost. He guides me by my elbow when we're walking together sometimes, the way men used to do, the way Dad used to do Mom when they were dressed up to go out somewhere special. Maybe he's just courtly by nature, and I do feel a little more comfortable around him now, but it feels a bit sexist. And then the other day, when he passed by and saw me in the dress shop, he not only came in and sat down in the waiting room, insisting that I needed a man's opinion, but actually stepped forward and adjusted my straps before the sales lady could. She had her eye on us, but at least she didn't make any slip-ups such as assuming that he was my husband or lover. Not that he didn't seem likely to give that impression, at least accidentally. I can't think why she didn't say something to cut him off, except that I seemed to know him, maybe that was it.

When she went back to the back to take a dart in something I was trying on for Donald's upcoming business dinner, Blaise came up and stroked the back of my neck, or at least that's what it felt like. I couldn't help shivering, but he said he was just removing a piece of lint from my neck. How he could see it from the chair he was sitting in is anybody's guess. I had the store's wrapper tied tightly around me, but I felt for a moment as if I were nude. And of course, she chose just that moment to come back in, when we were standing close together. I don't know her, but this isn't that big a city, and people know Donald and me from the agency. And Pam sometimes comes here to get her clothes when things are on sale. Not only that, but I'm pretty sure it was that boy of hers,

that Jeffrey, that came whizzing down the sidewalk on his skateboard just as Blaise and I went out, and I'm also fairly sure that he recognized me. He smirked, and had a mean little look on his face.

I really hope nothing gets back to Dad, or Donald. Not that there's anything to get back, but people will talk about almost anything, and Donald is an important man here in Nottingham. Of course, it may be unfair of me to think that another woman would be the first one to blame me, but I worry too about being seen with Blaise by Pam or Dolly or that girl of Tom's, what's her name, Julia something. What's especially unnerving is the way that Blaise keeps popping out at me from places, stores and service centers where I've never seen him before. Places where people I know are likely to shop.

Why, just last week when I went to get the car serviced, he pulled into the mall behind me a few seconds later, and drove his car up, too. It was a really beautiful car, a Jaguar. When the man told him right off that they didn't service Jaguars there, he said "Maybe you will not object to look around a little, *mon vieux*; my dealer, he is not sure, and maybe it is only oil, or something of that nature." The man looked at him with disbelief for a moment, then said in an irate tone of voice, "Listen here, what did you just call me?" It would have amused me if I didn't like Blaise a little better now, mostly because he has been so good to watch the baby for me at the agency when I just need to pop out for juice or something a minute. Blaise answered in a very soothing tone of voice, "*Non, non*, it means only 'my friend,' 'my friend.' Please not to be offended." The man was still glaring at him, and said, "Well, keep that sort of stuff to yourself. I ain't no friend of just anybody who walks in here." He started to walk away and then just as neat as you please, Blaise slipped something into his hand; the gesture was made more difficult by

the way the man seemed to think that Blaise was intending to shake hands or hold his hand or something, and tried to pull away. That's what allowed me to see that it was cash. Donald has done that sometimes too, and I don't really like it when he does it, it seems like he's just showing off. But with Blaise, it seemed appropriate. The man looked at Blaise, looked at me, then shrugged and said, "It's your money. But this lady's first, mark you, and just you keep your hands to yourself from now on."

Blaise sat with me and talked the entire time my car was being serviced; he can be very odd and funny, and has a gift for the amusing anecdote. He told me a lot of things that happened to him when he first came to this country, just like his encounter with the service technician. We are not a sophisticated lot, at least not in this town. And Blaise, in his own way, is naïve. Not in the usual sense of the word, but he always seems surprised and a little hurt that people could mistake his motives. I can remember how wary of him *I* was when we first knew each other. For that matter, I'm still a little uneasy about the way he hangs around so much and shows up everywhere. He's almost like an unmarried uncle to my Alice. Now, when he shakes her rattle at her or holds one of her toys up and makes peculiar noises with it, she laughs out loud in a way she doesn't even do for me or Donald. One day, he did it in front of Donald, and after he left, Donald tried to do it, and Alice just looked at him doubtfully and cooed once. Donald wrinkled his nose at me and observed, "I've always said, babies have no taste." It's the only sign he has ever given of not being totally taken up with Blaise and his plans and trips.

(Dot, Charlie, Jeffrey)

Well, I've gone and done it now. Here it is September, and I'm a married woman, after more than a year and a half of knowing Charlie. Yes, it'll be two years in February, I think. Let's see, we met in February, went for that cruise in April, moved in together in August, and now here we are, more than a year later, tied down for good. I can't see ever leaving Charlie, but I certainly had the jitters beforehand. He was cool as a cucumber, even on the day itself. If I were the type of woman who was just looking for a man to marry, I'd pat myself on the back for achieving it all so quickly. Then again, at our age, we both know what's what, and I guess there are fewer surprises. Charlie just thought I was happy, euphorically happy, and that that was what occasioned all the tears and upsets. I was really just having problems with feeling old and set in my ways, ways that he participates in, too.

He has taken me out to nice restaurants a few times, and even to the café once or twice, but I never feel he's really comfortable. I mean, I don't expect him to like it, I just wish he didn't dislike it so much. I guess as he says, wishing is like this: "if a frog had wings, it wouldn't bump its butt every time it tries to fly." The restaurants are less of a problem for him than the café, or any other trendy bistro or coffeehouse you want to name. He sees the point of dressing up and going out for dinner or drinks and spending a wad of cash on special occasions, it's just the quick impulse to spend a small extra amount regularly that has him stymied, and he has never forgiven the café for not having booths, like that dratted diner. A time or two the easy chairs have been free and we've sat in those to have coffee, but he asked me what the point was of going to someone else's

living room to drink something that you would throw out at home. He says their coffee tastes burned. And he accuses the pastry of not being fresh. It's very fresh, it's just crumbly and fancy and beautiful to look at, unlike those glazed doughnuts and coffee rolls he would put away by the score if I let him. He's just a sort who's naturally healthy, because I can't see how he has such a low cholesterol and sugar while eating some of the things he does. Maybe I should be glad that I'm married, and don't have to worry now about getting too old and fat to catch a man. No, that thought's unworthy of me, and not very flattering to Charlie, though he did make a remark or two some months ago about love handles. He did it in an affectionate way, though.

That's the thing about Charlie, he says lots of things that could get him into trouble with a woman determined to quarrel over every little slip of the lip, the way Evy probably is with Donald. Charlie does it deliberately, just so that I will correct him, because he loves to tease almost everyone he knows, even Evy herself. And that takes nerve. Although maybe because of what's happening we haven't seen a lot of Evy lately. When she and Donald came by for Sunday dinner after not being around since the wedding, she was relatively pleasant, even to me, and once even handed me the baby of her own accord. I've never had a baby, maybe Alice gets on her nerves sometimes. Alice's only here twice a week, and except on the rare occasions when Jeffrey's here the same day, Charlie and I can usually relax and play with her. She's very good-tempered for a baby; I thought they cried all the time. Some of the babies I took care of when I was younger certainly seemed to. Of course, that was in a day care environment, not an easy one at the best of times. Maybe Charlie and I are naturally sort of restful to be around, being older people ourselves, and not so full of motion.

I must say, I'm a little disappointed at the way Jeffrey ignores the baby most of the time. Every now and then, when Alice does something new, he'll be unable to stop himself from showing interest, but the minute he catches me watching him or smiling at him, he looks away. He's never come within more than a foot or two of her, displays no interest in holding her, and looks really put out whenever Charlie or I change a diaper in front of him. One day, though, when I had been careful not to look over his way and Charlie was out doing the weed trimming, I started to sing softly to put Alice to sleep. I don't know much, mainly old songs my mother and father sang to us, but Jeffrey very quietly removed his headphones and seemed to be listening. When I stopped and cleaned where Alice had spit up, he put his headphones in again without comment. Later, he went out on the porch and sat watching Charlie, though he normally shows no interest in "parking his keister" anywhere but on our small sofa, as Charlie has noted time and time again, greatly disgruntled.

Uncharacteristically, Charlie even offered to play catch with him once when Jeffrey had his mitt and softball with him after he had come from some sort of thrown-together game with his friends, but after measuring Charlie with his eyes a minute, Jeffrey asked, "You got a mitt?"

Charlie snorted and said, "To catch a softball with? I'll have you know, these hands are steel. How much speed do you have, anyway, kid?"

"I dunno. No, thanks."

But he did clean up his own plate that day after lunch, without a single solitary word being said about it amongst the three of us. I was in fact playing with Alice in her car seat when Charlie said "Psst," and pointed to Jeffrey's back as he went out of the room

carrying his plate and silverware. As the saying goes, my jaw dropped a foot, but Charlie's eyes were narrowed a little, as if he was wondering just what the kid was up to.

He tiptoed to the kitchen and peeked in, but came back shrugging. "He's washing his plate and stuff. Will wonders never cease!"

There may be an easier explanation than the baby, after all, though I still have hopes. It may be the great civilizing force of love, or at least of infatuation. I feel especially good about myself in a way because Jeffrey trusted me enough to tell me this, though he showed every sign of regretting his confidence by clamming up again immediately in the days after he had told me. It was a few days after the plate-cleaning incident, and we only had Jeffrey that day.

He came in, looking alertly around, or what was alertly for him, and said to me "No baby?"

I said, "No, Alice won't be here today. Just you, my dear." I hugged him, which he generally allows.

He said "Oh," and went and sat down on the sofa, his earphones already on the way to his ears.

I was dusting the furniture and humming some silly old thing a little later. Luckily, Charlie was out to get his cigarettes. I don't think, somehow, that I will tell him about this unless and until Jeffrey grows out of the teenaged doldrums someday, when Charlie can't try to tease him and put them permanently at loggerheads. I glanced over, and was quite startled to see that he was tearing up a little. This worried me, since he didn't seem like a crier, and forgetting all my best resolves not to interfere with him, I went and sat

down and put my arm around him and said, "What's wrong, sweetheart? Anything I can do anything about?"

He muttered something like "not interested in boys."

I said, "Who? Who's not interested in boys?"

He sighed, as if from the deepest, saddest part of him, and said, "There's this girl I sort of like, okay?"

"But how do you know she's not interested in boys?"

"I asked her to go out for a movie."

"Well, what did she say?"

"She said that. Said, 'My parents probably won't let me, and I like you, but I can't be interested in boys right now. I have to get ready for college.'"

His face wrinkled up, and fearing a total meltdown, which would almost certainly humiliate him for good, I said, patting his shoulder, "Well, you're both young yet, and likely she doesn't know about—about that sort of thing. And she sounds like a very smart girl. It's great that she's interested in having a college career! Look on the bright side: you can be good friends at school, surely her parents can't object to that. Time enough to worry about dating in a year or two. Or maybe her parents will allow you to go over to her house. If they get to know you, they may change their minds about letting her go out with you." I said a silent prayer of hope that on my advice he didn't show up with earphones and low-riding pants, which is what got him in trouble with Charlie to start with. But then, maybe these kids' parents are all used to that stuff. Somehow, though, if her parents were even restricting her from dating, with her apparent acquiescence, I doubted that Jeffrey's road ahead would be easy.

"Yeah. Maybe. If I change everything about myself."

That marched a little uncomfortably along with what I had just been thinking, so I said, "I tell you what. I just made some oatmeal raisin cookies, and Charlie's not here to hog them all. Why don't you come into the kitchen and have some cookies and milk, or just this once, some café au lait?"

My God, I must've sounded like the grandma in all the stories, but he was apparently too young to have heard the stereotype, or wasn't interested in mocking me and he said, "Yeah, I guess I have to get used to healthy stuff like oatmeal now. I really like your chocolate ones, you know."

"Well, oatmeal won't hurt you, it's very chewy and munchy. But don't you dare tell your mother I let you have café au lait. She said you'd try to get me to let you have some, but I don't guess once will hurt. I like it myself."

He looked up at me, and I almost think he was going to smile. He said, "You're really phat, you know?" I had been watching my weight carefully to knock off some pounds after the wedding, so I felt more than a little hurt, but he touched my arm, the first time he had ever initiated a touch, and said, "C'mon, not f-a-t. *P-h-a-t*. Like rad. Like cool."

"Oh, yes, I've heard the expression before, I'd just forgotten it. But 'cool' I understand, and 'rad' is even dated, now, I hear. Well, thank you Jeffrey, I always like compliments."

He accompanied me to the kitchen, not saying much about the whole thing, except while we were having our coffee and cookies, he actually took the trouble to make his expression and voice appealing, a little bit cooing almost. Like a young man unaccustomed to asking nicely for something.

"You won't tell *him* what I told you, will you? About Anna, that girl."

"No, of course not. Even before you asked me, I had decided that. Charlie is a good guy, you see, but sometimes his teasing is a little rough. Give him a chance otherwise, though. You never know, he might grow on you."

He did grin then, mischievously. "Like a fungus, sort of?"

"Now who's teasing?" I said. He sat for a few minutes drumming his thumbs on the kitchen table as if he didn't quite know what to do, and thank heavens Charlie came back a minute or two later, because I really didn't know what to do with him myself. My grandmothering skills are limited to trying to imagine what I would like, or trying to remember what I thought I would like when I was young. He looked Charlie straight in the eye for once, took one careful look at me, picked up his cup and plate and rinsed them out before placing them in the dishwasher, and left the room.

"Now what have you been up to, Mrs. Canterfield?" Charlie, thank God, smokes expensive cigarettes. I don't really know what kind, something unpronounceable like Quexvilla or the like, but they smell more like pipe tobacco than the usual cigarette. I can tolerate them better than the others, but he actually came from the back porch into the kitchen smoking, until I waved him back out.

"No smoking in the house, except in here, and here only in winter. Really, Charlie!"

"I'll bet you'd let me smoke in here in summer too, if I took you to that café all the time."

"I don't think even that's worth it. No, finish, and then you can come in and have a cookie."

"A cookie? What, I only get one now? I guess that young man has supplanted me and eaten all the cookies besides. Don't deny it, I see crumbs."

"Shh, he'll hear you."

"He's got his ears plugged up as usual by now, I bet. Okay, okay, Florrie, no need to wave your arms around like you're shooin' geese. I got the message. And you won't believe the message I got today, down at the diner. From old Mickey McFarlane, of all unlikely people. You'll wish I'd come in sooner when you hear the load of bullshit he was peddling."

I usually read him pretty well, but his good mood at being glad to see me and pester me changed like a summer sky; suddenly his face was full of thunderclouds.

I tried to distract him back into his good mood. "What were you doing down at the diner? I thought coffee served at home was the best of all. And I know you had a full breakfast, I cooked it myself. If you want to keep your boyish figure, you can't eat like a horse."

He put out the stub of his cigarette, lunged through the doorway, and smacked me on the rear end. "Don't nag, Bella, it doesn't suit you. You know perfectly well I wasn't eating, but I need the occasional cup of octane with fellow spirits too." Then he got serious. "But it may be a while before I consider McFarlane a fellow spirit again. If ever."

I couldn't imagine what on earth he was on about, but prepared to sit and listen to the second dishing-up of male troubles that day. "Okay, so talk, my love. I'm listening. No, leave that plate alone. Cookies after you finish talking, I don't want you to choke, and you look like you're full of something." I tried to put the cookies into the cupboard, but he managed to get a hold of about three, so I sat down and contented myself with waiting

while he started to pour himself some coffee, then changed his mind and went for the milk.

"So, my coffee isn't as good as the diner's, huh?"

"No, it's fine. It's just that I've got a bellyful of something else right now, and the acid is eating away at me already." He tiptoed to the dining room doorway; craned his head around the door; stepped out for just a second, I suppose until he could see the living room; then came back. "No, our guest is busy, as usual." He obviously didn't plan to sit, but leaned up against the kitchen sink, attacking the first of the cookies and taking a great gulp of milk.

I couldn't help but sigh. "Charlie, please don't eat like it's going out of style. You always get all the cookies you really want, dear, but I do wish you'd appreciate them. And besides, if you already have 'a bellyful of acid,' it's not good for you."

He gestured impatiently with the second cookie, and said, "Let me talk, will you? Anyway, I go in, and there are all my friends sitting there, having coffee as usual, in those last two booths, you know, their heads all together over something. At first, I thought it was just the usual stuff, Sam with his stock prices that no one else understands, and Ray and Bob quivering like crazy at every prediction he makes, however loony it sounds. Then I notice that the center of the whole thing is old Mickey, with all the rest of the ten or so of them huddling around him where he sat in the corner. Then, just like in the movies, they happened to look up and see me, and everybody got quiet. Bob's a decent sort of guy, you know, and he gets all red, clears his throat a few times, then says, 'Hello, there, Charlie. Well, guys, I guess I'd better be going. See you maybe tomorrow sometime.' As he passes me, he shakes my hand, and says, 'How's the wife, Charlie?'

I was turning to answer him, and then just as clear as a bell I happened to hear behind me one of those old coots say, '*Whose* wife are we talking about?' and a sort of muffled laugh like somebody getting a lot of mileage out of his own joke. I really don't have to hang around with them after all, they're a few years older than me anyway, most of them. When Bob was gone, I turned back around, not sure whether they were getting ready to kid me about something I had done, or you had done, or what, but when I paused by the table, getting ready to sit down in Bob's spot, the way any one of us would have done any other time, they jumped up and down like a bunch of jack-in-the-boxes, picking up caps and jackets, and all saying some variation of their sudden favorite line, 'I've got to go, got this to do, got that to do.' All except old Mickey, and he sat back in the corner by himself, just sipping and waiting, just sipping and waiting, like some sort of big fat spider."

"Big fat spider, Charlie? I don't remember him being particularly fat. And 'spider?'"

"Shh, don't interrupt. And for God's sake, don't be so literal. Well, I have never really liked him like I like the others, but I always thought it too bad that he has that cast in his eye, and that lame foot, and so I give him a lot of leeway. There's no telling what bitterness such things might stir up, especially since two of his wives left him. And the third one, that little wry thing, going around looking afraid of her shadow. I can really see some point to all this women's rights stuff when I look at her."

"Well, it's to be hoped so. And I hope it's not just her you would extend rights to."

"Don't get all huffy, you know what I mean. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he beats her, or something like that. At the very least, he outtalks her every time they're in public together."

I couldn't help giggling at that. "This from a man doing his level best to hog the conversation." He started to say something, then got a piece of the third cookie caught in his throat and started coughing. "Now see, Charlie, I told you not to wolf those cookies down like that. And I'm not nagging, just being concerned about you. You do that all the time. Here, I know that maneuver thing; wait, sit down, let me get behind you. Okay now?"

He nodded, and took another drink of milk, finishing the cookie before he said anything else, and turning up the last frothy white liquid from his glass. "I'm just so mad!" he said.

"Well, unless you're angry at me personally, try not to deprive me of my new husband."

He laughed and patted my hand, then sighed. "It's Evy, Dot. Some stupid old fool got it into his head that she's walking out on Donald with some Frenchified guy she picked up somewhere. Sees them everywhere together, with Donald nowhere in sight. Probably just somebody she knows from the agency, I said, quite logically, I thought. But *he* says, Mickey the Gossip, that his cousin works in the garage, and that they came in together acting like a couple of lovebirds while his cousin was there. Of course, the cousin doesn't set much store by it, because the man apparently palmed him a fifty while trying to hold his hand, or some such story, but Mickey makes it out that the man was paying for the privilege of being there with Evy, and trying to keep everybody quiet. Useless in this city, even as big as it is now. And certainly not for a fifty." He got quiet and reflected for a second. "It was much smaller when I was young. This sort of thing would've been all over town in no time flat. I have no idea what to say to Evy; I almost think Tom's my

best bet, he and I understand each other better. No offense, you know, but Evy's a woman's woman, and sometimes a man and his son know more what they mean together. Do you follow me?"

"No, sorry, for once I really don't, and I'm not just being difficult. But then, Charlie, if you don't mind my pointing this out, you're just a little old-fashioned, and being a woman's woman isn't what it used to be. Now it means being strong and independent and self-reliant, and fostering to other women. I hope you won't mind my saying that even though in her own way Evy may be the first three, she definitely isn't what I would call supportive of other women." He was paying attention. Emboldened by my success, I said, "In fact, just the opposite. And the sad thing is, when that sort of woman 'falls,' as they used to call it, other women won't stand by her or defend her, or in general look after her. Do you see?" He looked really downcast at that, like a troubled little boy, almost like the previously woeful Jeffrey, in fact. I added then, really quickly, "But I will help her if I can, Charlie, that is, if she'll let me. You know we've had our ups and downs, and she hasn't really taken to me even yet, though she seems to be warming up to me some lately. Who knows, maybe she didn't really approve of our not being married."

He thought about that. "Then what do you make of this rumor about her and this Latin lover? I mean, there must be somebody taking up a lot of her time to stir up old Mickey and make him practically challenge me for my corner barefaced. He didn't come as directly out with it as I've given it to you, of course, just insinuated, and balked until I pressed him, which I did for a while, until I found out the gist of it. And then, he said how it probably wasn't true, he certainly hoped not, and what a fine family we are, and all that. Damn, I should've busted him in the chops while I had the chance! But when he got

up to go, he started that limping he does, and his eye kept twitching, with sheer evil, probably, and I couldn't let myself go the way I wanted to. I was left sitting there all alone, with a cup of cold coffee, and if you want to talk about a bad feeling, that was it." He had clearly let the most of it go now, and I found myself treating him the same as I had treated Jeffrey, talking to him in a soft and soothing voice, patting his hand, and trying to get him to look on the bright side of his troubles. Only, his troubles were more adult, harder even for the best of us to unravel or understand, and at the moment seemed to have no bright side, except the thought that it might all be just a flash in the pan, gone with a moment's explanation. Somehow, though, I couldn't see Evy laughing this off. She wasn't the type, even if faithful, to be confident enough to think it funny that a bunch of Charlie's old pals were gossiping away about her like groups of women unfairly get the reputation for doing. I couldn't in the end think of anything else to say, except, "Well, Charlie, even if it turns out to be true, Donald is a kind and sane man, and Evy may come to her senses. And if it's not true, and I'll admit, it does sound rather bizarre, Evy always having been the sort of—well, almost conservative woman that she is, what about that? Think of all the time and energy and stomach acid you'll have wasted worrying about it. Don't worry about it now, we'll talk about it after you've had a while to cool off, and after Jeffrey has gone home for the day."

"I'm not sure how much more I can stand to talk about it."

I said, as lightly as possible, "Oh, well, we usually manage to stand what we have to if it ever comes. And in this case, I consider that a big 'if.'"

He looked a bit cheered up, then said, "You think of Evy as conservative, do you?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I do."

"Well, missy, I'll have you know she voted Democratic in the last election."

"I was talking sexual politics, Charlie, not Republican-Democrat stuff."

He paused and cocked an eye at me. "Uh-huh. Well, if you think of Evy as conservative—just what have *you* been doing with all your time, you wicked radical, you?"

"Selling my soul to a devil of a man, Charlie, selling my soul to a devil of a man."

That cheered him up a lot more, as any reference to his sinfulness usually does, and he leaned over the table and kissed me. And that ended our discussion of the matter for the moment.

(Julia Beth)

I saw Mr. Canterfield, Charlie, doing something odd in the Corinth Shopping Plaza today, though I'm sure he didn't see me. I'm afraid he must be onto something about his daughter and the man I saw her with, the one from the grocery store. I had just rented a cart from the attendant and was proceeding without much enthusiasm to shop for some new camping equipment (when Tom and I went to Holderston down on the river, I found my sleeping bag inexplicably torn into shreds on the inside, and my fishing line an irremediable tangle. The sleeping bag, where my former boyfriend Mark's dog insisted on sleeping, may have been shredded by the dog, but that human louse must've been the one who rolled it back up so that you couldn't see the mess. The line I have no explanation for, it was just wadded up in a big jumble on the bottom of my fishing tackle. I couldn't find some of my lures, either. Denmark isn't the only place where something's rotten).

I was pushing the cart in a heavy crowd of inside pedestrian traffic, trying to avoid the other carts, and those infernal gawkers who come only to window-shop and have no real errands there, when I saw him step out from the Food Court, carrying a cup of something. I thought I should catch up and say "Hello," the more so since Tom has told me that his father asks after me all the time. I noticed how intent he looked, but it wasn't until I nearly caught up with him that he stopped suddenly and peered into a video arcade, as if he had some interest there. That was certainly odd. I had almost drawn even with him and was about to speak when he bobbed and weaved his head about as if trying to see someone in front of him. I looked ahead too, thinking that maybe Dot was there and he

was just a bored husband trying to pass some time while his wife shopped, but the way ahead was too crowded for me to see past all the strangers. The big unseasonable sales were on again because of the bad economy, and the place was packed. As I pushed forward, starting to work up a bit of a sweat in the badly air-conditioned passage, longing for a nice cool store and nowhere near Ron's Tennis, Tee and Tackle yet, he stopped up ahead of me again, this time in front of a Hallmark store. He didn't go in though, just glanced in the window a minute and then jerked his head around, looking forward. I started to feel as if I were in a bad detective movie, or some peculiar espionage film where one spy follows another spy following another spy.

He stopped dead ahead in the lane just ahead of me, turned to face me, swilled down the rest of whatever he was drinking, and pulled a sour face at it. I thought he must surely see me soon, but after glancing over his shoulder, he aimed the cup at a nearby trash barrel, tossed it in, and started to pursue his quarry again. I tried to think of whether or not he was still employed and at what, but I was quite sure it wasn't private eye work. No, Tom and Evy had said their father had co-owned a construction company with a friend. It didn't even occur to me that he could be following his own daughter in that surreptitious way. It just didn't seem like something he would do anyway, being as forthright as he was.

Finally, I did draw even with him and thought better of speaking. He was standing holding open the door of a men's store, a far more probable place for him to be headed, though he wasn't going in. He was standing, scowling like a gargoyle, and still looking straight ahead. Fortuitously for me and my curiosity at least, the crowds parted just ahead of me, and I caught sight of what he was looking at. There stood his daughter Evy

and her friend from the grocery store, who was running his hand up and down her back in a sort of supportive gesture, as if reassuring her. They were engaged in earnest conversation, though it would've been hard to say about what. There was after all no other sort of touching going on, no embrace or peck on the cheek when they parted, nothing that would really mark them as lovers, except for the fact that it was a weekday, and Tom had said his sister spent all her free time in the travel agency helping out. But maybe the man was a family friend of Donald's whom Mr. Canterfield didn't know, or something. Though Tom had told me his father was of the "original bedrock" of the area, and knew lots of people from when the city was only a large country town. As soon as they parted and just as I passed Gentry's Male Apparel, Charlie Canterfield went on into the store, his stride unmistakably that of a very vexed man. He clearly hadn't intended to have a showdown, or at least probably not unless the two had committed themselves by some definite visual cue. Still, it couldn't have been pleasant for him, a new grandfather and a new husband, to be trailing around his own daughter in that way. On the other hand, maybe he had just happened upon them as I had that time in the grocery store. Yes, that was far more likely, since he seemed to be actually intending to buy something in the men's store. How I had the ill fortune to come across them twice, I'll never know, I wouldn't have said we moved in the same circles. Of course, anyone can go to the grocery store and the mall.

Well, at least as far as I was concerned, the show was over for the day. Replacing my camping and fishing equipment was an annoying and expensive aftermath, and there was still the question of what I should say to Tom about all this family drama, if anything. I didn't really feel it was my place to spread what might only turn out to be vicious gossip,

but if it turned out to amount to anything, I didn't want to be behindhand with him. Then, a bright thought occurred to my otherwise heat-addled brain: after all, no one had seen me. I hadn't been seen by Eve and her friend either time, the friend didn't know me, and Charlie had been too wrapped up in his spying to even notice me when he was facing me. Didn't that absolve me of responsibility? Not in the strictest possible sense as Tom's girlfriend, maybe, but certainly in the very pragmatic sense that no one seemed to know anything for sure yet, especially not Charlie, if he was following them and prying, and not Tom, because Tom seems constitutionally unable to keep anything from me. Oh, he doesn't seem to gossip with other people, but me he already trusts implicitly. And for all I knew, it was all a will-o'-the-wisp, a figment of my imagination. "Idle tongues find idle ears," as my grandmother used to say. Yes, on the whole it was still better to say nothing and keep the peace.

(Blaise)

I have two minds. No, I am of two minds, that is the way to say it. Evy likes me, it is clear, but she treats me like an old *sabot*. I am the comfortable confidant, the one she can speak to of everything. *Bien entendu*, it seems of everything. Sometimes I think she will never stop talking. I hear all about every vomit the baby has, I hear about every female gossip that passes her way, I everlastingly hear about Donald *le Magnifique*. Oh, there are times when to her he is not so *magnifique*, but when I say to her, "Ah, you may find someone else, who knows, more *sympathétique*, more the sort of man for you," she entirely does not comprehend, but answers something *très stupide, comme une végétale*, to say "No, I l-o-o-o-ve him, he just makes me to be angry sometimes." Why apply herself to me in this way if she does not intend to make advantage of the sleepiness of her husband? *Certainment*, this is not an occupation for impatient men. *Pour deux semaines* I must return to France, and perhaps if I am away she will think again of me and in a way more acceptable. In the same time, there may be other interests for me.

(Dot, Charlie)

Unintentionally, I've stirred up a hornet's nest in Charlie's emotions now. I sent him to the plaza a few days ago to buy himself some new socks because he had worn out most of his heavier ones at the heels and toes and cold weather is coming on soon. When he came back, he trod up the front stairs with a very heavy tread indeed, and sat out on the porch. Well, the weather is still quite fine, but I couldn't understand why he didn't come on in to brag about the value and quality of his purchases, since he had defied my choice of men's store and cast his vote in favor of the new one. Myself, I suspect that he was afraid of seeing someone he knows and getting the awkward treatment his friends gave him a couple of weeks back at the diner. Charlie usually can't resist blowing his own horn in a quite adorable way, really, as long as you aren't too sensitive or a teenaged boy like Jeffrey. But he just sat out there. He didn't ask for any iced tea, or coffee, or anything. He hasn't brooded out on the front porch for quite a while now.

I went over to the door and said, "Charlie, hon, are you hungry, or thirsty?"

"Nope," he said. He kept looking out in front of him, and clutching the arms of the chair with an iron grip. His bony old knuckles were standing out.

I waited a minute and asked as quietly as possible, "Want some company?"

He looked over at me, but it was as if he was looking through me. "Suit yourself."

Now, that made me mad. I hadn't done anything to him, and he had clearly been shopping, because he had a big bag with him, in fact a gigantic bag, too large even for fifteen pairs of socks. "Now, listen here, mister, don't you go ragging on me—"

"I saw them."

"Saw--?"

"Evy and her—whatever he is. Together at the mall. He had his hands all over her."

"Oh, Charlie, I'm sorry. Was he—was she—well, I mean, was it improper touching in public?"

"You want the details, do you?"

In one of the eternal gestures of womanhood, I found myself with my hands on my hips confronting him. "I'm not the enemy, Charlie, and believe it or not, neither is Evy. If you can keep your temper a minute, and keep a civil tongue between your teeth, I think we can talk this out. As I said, was he—was he kissing her in an intimate way, were they holding hands, or something that would mean he wasn't just some friend of Donald's, or what?"

He drew a deep breath, and though he raised his voice at me a bit emphatically, I tried to take it for what it was worth, both the misdirected attitude of anger and the information. "They were walking along together talking and laughing like sweethearts, and when he left her at a store, he rubbed all over her back, barely missing her backside! I don't know about you, but carrying on like a couple of teenaged kids when you're already married to somebody else strikes me as 'improper in public' or anywhere else, to use your delicate expression. And I'm not sure what to make of this, I'm almost afraid to think of it: she was going into a lingerie store, that one that's all hot pink and vulgar-looking."

"Victoria's Secret?"

"That's the one!"

"Well, Charlie, women do buy lingerie, even for their husbands' entertainment. And that white frothy thing of mine with the red ribbons that you're so fond of came from there."

He was momentarily diverted. "Did it really?"

"Yes, although I've had to take it to Mary's Seams to have it adjusted a time or two."

Suddenly he was scowling again. "Yeah, but you're missing the point. Maybe Evy hasn't committed herself yet. Like you said, he didn't kiss her. Well, I guess he couldn't really do that, maybe she was afraid of seeing someone she knew. Not that she looked particularly ashamed." He was clearly turning this new development over in his mind.

I tried to be practical. "What do you think you—or we, but probably you'll prefer you—should do? Do you want to talk to her?"

He struggled with this. "How?"

"Well, you know, when she comes by. It's not as if it's even a nine days' wonder, Charlie. It happens all the time, in the best of families and some of the not so good. Evy is used to getting her own way with Donald, and maybe she just got a little bored of him, wanted him to exert his own will a bit. I'm not calling him a dishrag, you understand, but I do get the feeling that except in business, she rules the roost. Somebody usually has to a little bit, not everyone is as evenly matched as you and I are."

He did cool down a little bit then. He reached over and took my hand and said, "We are, aren't we?"

I kissed him on the tiny little bald spot in the middle of his crown of curly hair, and said, "Yes, we are. You're almost as jealous of Evy as if *you* were Donald."

He shook his head and said, "Now don't be starting any of that dirty Greek literary stuff. You keep me out of that. Keep it for your friends in the book club. Besides, even if it weren't for Evy's welfare, and Donald's too, there's the family reputation to be thought of."

"Can I see your socks?"

"Go ahead."

"Oh, Charlie, these all have clocks on them. No plain socks!"

"Clocks?"

"You know, designs. What are you going to do with all patterned socks? And why did you buy two new shirts and one, two—five ties? It's the first time I've ever known you to get carried away by the shopping bug." I patted him on the shoulder, because he was looking like a wrathful Agamemnon himself. Poor man, his nerves were at a stretch like those of a man watching a protracted striptease. My, what an inappropriate image. I really have no idea of what a man watching a striptease feels. In the television shows, they're all sort of bored.

"Well, I didn't want to catch up with Evy, just in case they were meeting up again somewhere, and I needed something to do, so I guess I just kept buying stuff. I think I bought a few hankies, too. After all, a shopping mall isn't the place to have a family row."

"Charlie, these are lovely! They must have cost a lot. Your old hankies were getting a bit hard to clean, and these will come in handy. But where did you go next? You were gone quite a while. You missed lunch, and in a few hours it'll be time for dinner."

"First, I found myself sneaking out to my car for all the world as if I was the one carrying on. Not looking up at anybody, waving at a distance and keeping on going if anyone called my name. And there were one or two people there I knew at least slightly, which made it all that much worse. If I thought it was just the new folks 'round here who don't know anybody, it wouldn't have been so bad. Of course, the worst part of it is what Evy is doing to herself and her marriage. I don't know, I brought those kids up to be honest, and I'll have to say this for their mother, she was one of the most honest women living. A little too outspoken, like Evy, but as true as the day is long."

I sighed, and he jerked his head up in annoyance at the sound. He really doesn't like sighs, for some reason, and it had been a tactical error, but hard to repress. I said, "Look, Charlie, where have you been living? Haven't you noticed all the breakups and divorces and quarrels going on these days? What makes you think that honest people are immune from maybe having second thoughts, or being divided in their minds, or just getting bored?"

Very softly he said, squeezing my hand, "And is that the way you feel, old girl?"

"Charlie! Of course not!" But I'd certainly had a few second thoughts before making the commitment to marry him. Not about big things, really, but sometimes it's the small things that drag people down, just the inundation of small things.

"Anyway, then I decided I might as well face it out, and I'd had a lousy cup of that coffee with cream and some spice or other in it, so I thought I'd to go by Ainsley's Diner. It was a slack time of day, which was probably the best way to ease back into it. But almost nobody I knew was there. I sat at the counter so that Ruth could serve my coffee and pie—"

"Ah-ha, pie. So that's why you're not hungry."

"You're the worst woman to interrupt. So, I sat there for a while and spoke to a couple of families who came in, one that used to live on the block here and one that used to be close friends with my wife, my first wife. And nobody acted funny or looked funny, or anything." He waited a minute. "I'm in the dark here. I can't ask Evy straight out if she's stepping out on Donald, I sure can't warn him the way men used to do, being her father, and it may even be too early to assume anything, but better too early than too late." He spread his hands and fingers out wide, as if measuring something too big for him. "Well, what would you do? And I don't want something from a lovelorn book."

"Now Charlie, that's unfair. Have you ever known me to read a self-help book?" He didn't answer, but cast his hands in his lap. "Why don't you try starting with your own experience, and playing a little dumb, if that's what it is."

"My own experience? I don't have any experience at cheating on someone!"

I grinned at him. He thought I didn't know. "Not cheating, exactly, but before you had your sights firmly set on me, I know there was another woman or two around. Men usually think of it as playing the field, women as not making a firm commitment." He frowned and looked embarrassed, and started to argue, but I said, "Anyway, that's not the kind of experience I meant. I meant, why not take Evy for a little walk around the block the next time she comes, and just say to her that you saw her at the mall, and that though she might not realize it, to some people being seen with a man's hands all over your back might suggest something improper."

"Then what?"

"See what she says. Evy's a sensible woman in a lot of ways, and moreover she's your own daughter, whom you say you've brought up so honestly. You'll be able to tell what's going on in her mind, I'll be bound."

"It's not her mind I'm worried about; or at least—"

"It's her mind that's most at issue. Remember that show we saw on tv about sexual response? The most important sex organ is the brain."

"What I don't understand is why Donald isn't onto it by now. They say, though, that the mate is always the last one to know."

"Sometimes I guess that's true. But Donald is a comfortable sort, not likely to be suspicious, particularly not of Evy. But if she and the man have been seen together all over town, she must be spending a lot of time away from the agency. It's even more peculiar that Donald hasn't noticed that."

"Maybe that's what's boring Evy, Donald's nose-to-the-grindstone attitude. But he's a good businessman, everybody says so, and he's given her a really nice life."

"She's given him one too up until now, Charlie. Don't blame her too much before you know all the facts. It may turn out to be a tempest in a teapot, after all." We had talked ourselves out on the subject for the moment, I thought, so I patted his shoulder and said, "I know. Why don't we get the little table out and eat out here this evening? We can have a chicken Caesar salad like you like, I've already prepared the chicken. It'll be cooler than in the house; it's still warm in there from the stove, and I think we should be trying to save more on the heat and air conditioning." I jostled his arm. "Especially after you've spent so much on clothing, you clothes horse, you."

He smiled up at me gratefully, and I could tell how much he was relieved by our discussion. Someday maybe I'll get an honorary degree in psychology. "Do you remember, Dot, exactly where we put the little table and chairs? Are they in the garage or the basement?"

"As you've told me before Charlie, 'If I'd taken you to raise, I would've sent you to school.' Get busy, now."

(Dot, Fay)

"Hi, Fay. Are you shopping for the new book too?"

"The new book? Do you mean *The Season of Roderick's Despair*? Though Murray has had other and better books out since then; I'm not sure why it was picked. As a matter of fact, I'm not. I'm looking for an ecological anthology. But haven't you heard? I saw Jimmy Knox and he said he was going to call you."

That bothered me a little, until I reflected that it was unlikely to be a personal message if Fay knew about it. "Call me about what?"

"The lit. club's being cancelled. At least for the fall."

"No, no one called me. Why is Jimmy calling people? Shouldn't Beatrice be doing that? I mean, it meets at her house."

"Jimmy called me. He's evidently helping her out as a friend. Her husband Peter has split with his half of their savings. And a younger woman."

"No! You must be kidding!"

She got a strange, bitter smile on her face. "Not me. Peter left her with that huge house to take care of and only half of the money to do it with. And you know, she only manages that boutique he bought her as a sort of hobby. It probably doesn't turn over much."

"My God! What next!"

"You say that as if all sorts of catastrophes had been happening." She looked at me inquisitively, but we weren't by any means close enough friends for me to confide in her about Charlie's troubles, which I wouldn't have done anyway without his permission.

"Oh, I just meant—well, unpredictable things happen more often lately, it seems."

She looked at me again and said, "Do you mean like Melena and her boyfriend? I guess her behavior at the club these days has been an eye-opener." Melena had lately been reading passionate love poems without much of what I, at least, considered real quality to them, and being rather silly about any romantic angles in the novels we read.

"No, Fay, not at all, just these days people seem to split up easier."

"Yeah, I guess so. Although just for the record, you may not really be interested, Melena and I were never an item. She started out without quite having the courage of her political convictions, and then tied me up by confiding her troubles with men to me. I guess I got the wrong impression."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said, "Well, if you can't find the book you're looking for, why not come back to the information desk and let Tom find it for you? It sounds like just the kind of thing he would be interested in himself."

"Who's Tom?"

"My stepson. He owns this bookstore."

She grinned. "I don't suppose there's any chance of a friendly discount? It's an expensive book, but one reviewer at least called it 'the new ecological Bible,' and another said it was '*Whole Earth Catalogue* meets *Mother Jones*.'"

"I think there is a discount policy if you have a 'frequent buyer card.' Usually, you can't use it the same day you buy, but just maybe Tom will be willing, since I know you. He's given me an unofficial discount before, though that's telling tales out of school, I guess."

She laughed. "School was boring anyway."

"Give me just a minute. And promise not to be offended if he says 'no,' though I can't imagine it. He really likes his customers, and likes peoples who read."

"It would be ungenerous of me to ask for a favor like that and then get offended if it can't instantly be granted. I certainly don't mind taking time to get the card, I'm in here all the time. I've just been too lazy to give my e-mail address before and answer the survey. I'll wait here for you." She smiled at me, turned to another bookshelf, and attentively scanned the back of a paperback.

I talked with Tom, who was delighted that I had provided him with another sale and another loyal customer, little though I could take credit for these things. I reflected briefly on the book I had in my own hands, *The Season of Roderick's Despair*, and whether or not I should still buy it. Fay had said it was not as good as some others by the same author. Then I considered that it was Malcolm Murray's first effort, and might be worth a read anyway. Beatrice, after all, had always encouraged us to form our own opinions. Poor Beatrice! She was our guiding inspiration, had set up the book club in the first place, and had always been so generous of her time and space. And Peter had seemed like a slightly abstracted but basically loving husband. Of course, I had only seen him at the very ends of evenings or when he came in from the kitchen with refreshments. And they were still a fairly young couple, only in their forties or so, certainly too young for what used to be called mid-life crises. Well, I couldn't think about it any more. People's motives were beginning to read like Dante's dark thicket, and it made things seem less hopeful in Evy's and Donald's situation too.

I left the bookstore after receiving Fay's gracious thanks and parting from her and Tom where they stood wrapped in a deep discussion about ecology and the faults of the

local recycling plant. I really needed time and space to think, about what I wasn't sure, but I was almost afraid that if I went to Paul's Café and Deli that I would see the gloating Melena and her current amour again, and that was just too much. The clause that kept coursing through my mind was "things fall apart, things fall apart." I'm not one usually to think about dark decline, decay and death. Then I remembered a book we had read by Chinua Achebe with that same clause as its title, and dimly the Yeats poem that was the original source of the clause. My mind then went to other lines of the poem, all jumbled together, and I resolved to look at the poem again later. After all, my small troubles were nothing to compare to the subject of Yeats's poem, were they? "The Second Coming?" And what about Achebe's tale of an entire society falling apart? My troubles were not so big, surely. As I drove home, I found myself crying without cause. Surely without cause. Charlie was my center, or at least our life together was, and nothing, not even Evy's bad behavior, could tear it apart. I was quite determined about that. And maybe the lit. club would re-form somehow or other, in the spring. The season of hope, I thought, and then, how trite of me. And yet, how apt if it really did.

(Tom, Dan)

Today Dan Greene said the oddest thing to me. He was by the bookstore to take over my shift so that I could go to the book fair in Holderston. I had just loaded up the van with the first editions and rare books I meant to take and I suspect he, as usual, had just smoked some weed in his old rattletrap sedan. He's never been the type to steal from me, he just seems to do without when he can't afford the stuff, but Dad would die if he knew that Dan, my roommate through three years and more of college, was a pothead.

Somehow, I never picked up the habit, despite Dan's eagerest coaching. I just remember that one time when Dan got hold of what he regarded as "really swell shit," I smoked too, and got so unnerved that I sat watching an old turntable revolve, and panicked because it seemed to take so long. Finally, I started alternately watching the clock and looking at the turntable to try and figure out the real time. I had tried to keep pace with Dan before that, but that's when I knew I was too much of what Dan called "an anal fascist" to really enjoy letting go to that extent. Alcohol has always done for me since then.

Anyway, I can't help but wonder if maybe the weed is what provoked Dan's remarks; otherwise, I have to conclude that he's always had a crush on Evy, which is so hard to imagine that it's not even worth trying. If I'm an anal fascist, what is she?

I had just handed over the keys to him and cautioned him about having the other two employees watch out for shoplifters, something Dan gets a little careless about when he is doing one of his generally successful selling riffs; suddenly he giggled. I was tense, and felt I could use a laugh. Dan has a good sense of humor when it isn't just nonsense from

his latest high. He's really quite intelligent and well-read in addition to his more flagrant qualities.

"What's up, Dan? Seen the latest Rebecca Worth clip from her Webpage?" He was currently following the ridiculous non-career of a conservative Internet politician from Wyoming.

He giggled harder. "You could say that."

I waited, but nothing more was forthcoming. Balancing a book or two in my hand rather impatiently, I said, "So, am I saying that or not? Share the joke."

Just as suddenly, he sobered up. "It doesn't look like a joke."

"Well, what, is she finally making good her bid for the White House?"

"Not her." He leaned up in my face. "I know someone who's 'hot to trot.'"

"Where on 'god's green earth' did you hear that expression? It's 'as old as the hills,' if we're capping each other's phrases now." That was a game we'd once played for hours when Dan was stoned. And he won.

"Nope. God's honest truth. Your sister likes me; but she likes him better."

I laughed. "Evy? Him who? Dan, you've known her for years! Evy's married years ago, remember? You came to the wedding."

He nodded and winked. I laughed again, a little uncertainly. After all, a high wasn't the same as a drunk. Likely Dan had seen Evy out somewhere and she had uncharacteristically been friendly. I had never told her about his habits, but Evy's prejudices were often right on target, given the very different sort of life she led. She was sometimes wrong about people, but she knew what she didn't like.

"Now, Dan, you've got the keys, and for chrissake put crap about Evy out of your head. You're high, you melon-baller, you." I was referring to the time Dan had used a coffee spoon to ball thirty melons during a high when he was under the impression that he was getting ready for a party. Three of us were there, two of us mostly drinking margaritas while he and another guy smoked.

"Hey, me, I'm in love with Fay Wray."

"Alright, King Kong, see you tomorrow. Whatever you do, make sure you lock the door."

He drew himself up a bit and looked injured. "I always do, don't I?"

"There's always a first time."

"Man, maybe it'll be you."

"No, it won't. See you tomorrow," I repeated, shutting the door but watching him shrug and turn away until he was back in the store. He looked a little like an overeager puppy as he stood inside the front door. I pulled away, almost wishing I were able to tell Evy about her latest conquest, if that's what it was. Really, I suppose it was her only conquest since her marriage, and it wasn't likely to remain in Dan's mind for long. Evy wasn't the sort to attract hordes of men, though she was a pretty enough woman, and still young. I almost regretted that I couldn't trust Dan to get a fair price for my best books at the book fair, because I would've liked to roast him properly about what he'd said as he came down from the aether. Oh, well, another time.

(Evy, Donald, Blaise)

Blaise has been away for ten days now. I miss him. I mean, he's my closest friend. It's not like having a female friend. He consoles me, and brings me things, and watches the baby for me. Even the baby misses him. She doesn't laugh as much as she does when he's here. Or maybe it's just that I don't play with her as much as he does. I could never say this to Dad, I'm sure he would scowl at me or disapprove, but the baby makes me nervous. When I try to tell Donald that, he only says that it's because she's my first and I don't have any experience. When I told the pediatrician, he said to try and relax with her, sing to her. I don't have a very good singing voice. Donald also said that if I spent more time with her alone, I might get used to her more easily, and she might respond to me differently, but he's one to talk. He only gives her perfunctory attention. Why, the other day he watched her for a few minutes while I went to get my nails done, which hadn't been done for two weeks. When I came in, she was almost crying, as if she had half-started to, and he was rocking the bassinet with the footpedal and reading some documents. Not even looking at her!

Blaise is good for my self-esteem, too. People sometimes turn to watch us when he goes shopping with me, and I think it's because we make such a handsome couple. Donald is nice-looking, I guess, but Blaise is what most women would consider gorgeous. I've noticed that men don't seem to like him much, though. I wonder why that is. He's friendly to everyone, and tries so hard to fit in. It's not really fair of them, him being a foreigner and all. I often think of how homesick he must get, so far away from home. Well, I remember how I felt those two semesters I was in college before I met

Donald, and I was only upstate. And about that, every time I tell Donald that I wish now I had finished school, he kisses me or pats my bottom and says, "Just stay as sweet as you are," which is revoltingly sexist, though I know he's joking. He has offered to pay for extension courses, certainly, but that was before I got pregnant. I'm almost afraid to hear what he'll say if I bring up the subject now, since we have a baby. Not that he would really discourage me outright, but it could become a source of contention between us.

On the other hand, when I tell Blaise about my college days and say how much I wish I had finished, he very loyally says, "And you will someday, I know it. Me, I can feel it." And then he kisses my hand or something. Well, the hand kiss is a little over the top, but that's just because we're in America. I think I would like France, though, where the men must be more like Blaise. Donald used to take me on trips with him, but he always declines the international bonus trips that come down the line, I don't know why. I asked him the other day why we didn't go to Belgium or Germany or somewhere; I was a little shy of saying something about France, which I would really like to see, because I was afraid he would get the wrong impression of Blaise and me.

He said, "Too expensive, time-consuming, and apt to involve endless waits in the baggage *and* customs cues."

I said, "But we arrange trips for other people all the time. And we have enough money to go, surely."

He got really stern all of a sudden. I've never seen him that way before. Almost like he was my father. "I said, no. The money isn't the question. And besides, we have a new baby now. We should be parents for a while before we think of doing any more travelling."

He had said money *was* the question! I started crying, but he didn't even see me, he was looking down at his name plate on his desk and adjusting it like that was the most important thing in the world. Then he straightened his tie. Well, of course, I kept it quiet, because I felt unable to stand up to him the way I usually do, and I didn't want him to come pawing all over me if he heard me crying. Thank God there's been no occasion for that sort of thing at home for a while.

Well, I used to like what Donald and I had, the intimacy. But several times since the baby was born, he actually tried to put the moves on me after the baby woke us up at night and one or the other of us, usually me, came back from seeing to it. How inconsiderate can a man be! I usually turn in for a little while in the mornings after he leaves for work and the nanny gets there, but I still need more sleep. Those middle of the night times, at least when Alice doesn't cry for too long, are the times when I feel the closest to her, funny though it seems. She coos at me, and kicks her arms and legs, and sometimes we go to sleep together rocking in the rocking chair.

But no matter how much I may love Donald, and how much he may be my husband, I just don't think he really knows how to touch a person. Why, sometimes Blaise's lightest touch seems more appealing than Donald's heavy moving around on top of me used to be. Blaise found me upset and crying one day, for no particular reason that I can think of, and I was really embarrassed because even though the agency was empty, I was afraid someone else would come in and see me. And he immediately noticed and came around the edge of the desk and took me in his arms and held me. I was even more upset at first, because no one has ever held me that way except Donald since I dated a guy at college; but the minute I tried to get free, instead of tightening up his arms the way Donald

sometimes does, Blaise sat me down and said, "Shh! *Je suis un ami, un ami*, a friend. Do not cry so." And then he sat by me to the far side, away from the window, and ran his fingers up and down my arm. Well, at first it made me shiver, but later it was incredibly soothing. He just has the softest, smoothest touch. And now, any time I'm in the doldrums and we are alone, Blaise strokes my arm. I almost wish I could turn my desk around so that he could do the other one too, my right arm is getting a little too used to his touch. Of course, it's harmless, but I've noticed he never does it when Donald's around, as indeed he shouldn't. Donald would take it the wrong way, anyway.

Blaise said he was going to be gone for a while, and when I asked him how long he smiled at me and said, "Oh, *ma belle*, I will be desolated if I am away more than a week or two, for I will miss your *beaux yeux* and your delightful *bébé*. I have it in my mind to say, I will come back just for you, but then—*ma belle*—then, you will owe me something." He wiggled his finger at me gently.

"Owe you something?"

"*Oui*. For you know, *les petits cadeaux douces entretiennent l'amitié*." And he kissed my cheek, just barely brushing it.

I tried to work it out, but my French was too rusty. He could see that I didn't understand, and explained, "You will owe me back what I just gave to you, I think you call it a '*bec of de* cheek.'"

I laughed: that was all! "Oh, I can give you that now, just to say good-bye. And it's 'a peck on the cheek.'" I suited the action to the word, and he seemed happy with that. Really, it takes so little to make Blaise happy, he has a naturally cheerful nature. And he may not be back for four more days, and who knows how long before he actually comes

into the agency. Of course, I gave him my cell phone number, so he can call when he arrives. I just hope Donald isn't here when he gets here. Blaise will wait for me if I have any other clients, but I have to be careful how many times I call in sick to Donald, or put up the "closed" sign in the window until he comes back to relieve me. He got really touchy with me last week for doing that. Still, Blaise will be back soon, and that's all that matters.

(Dot, Pam, Charlie)

Pam dunked one of my cookies in her coffee, and took a little nibble. She smiled at me. I smiled back. There wasn't much to say, and Charlie was in and out of the kitchen several times, grabbing cookies, going out back to smoke, and generally getting in the way. I couldn't think just what had occasioned Pam's visit, unless something was wrong with Jeffrey. He wasn't with her, on a day when he usually would have been coming to us. When I asked where he was, she said, "Oh, I just came to tell you that today's plans have sort of changed. I hope it won't disarrange anything you might have scheduled. He's over at a friend's house playing video games."

"Oh, really?" I said, glad to think that at least he had friends. "Male or female?"

"Hmmm?" she said, not really having attended to my question, apparently.

"His friend, male or female?"

"Funny you should say that. Jeffrey, with his own money, bought a bouquet of flowers last week and asked his father to drive him to a girl's house to drop them off. I was really surprised. He was wearing his fall suit; of course, it's still a little too warm for it, but he insisted. I thought that all kids of both sexes did these days was hang around on corners and go to arcades and malls. And Jeffrey's always been a mall rat with the best of them, though I suppose I shouldn't say it of my own son. And he didn't stay any time at all. His dad figured he would stay inside for a while, but after about five minutes he came back out, saying nothing, red from ear to ear. His father couldn't pry anything out of him, and I don't want to be too pushy. We had our talks with him about responsibility early, when he was eleven, since there have been a couple of cases of early teen

pregnancy in his school, and he knows what's what. But he hasn't tied up the phone for hours the way we expected, or anything like that, though his hair style for school has taken a couple of unlikely turns, and he's dressing a little neater. And no more requests for body piercing. I sort of hope this one sticks, to tell you the truth, though she's probably his first love interest."

I nodded sympathetically, but of course didn't feel I could tell what Jeffrey had told me. It wouldn't be playing the game. Pam fell silent, seeming to have nothing more to say, so I prodded again, "And is he at her house today?"

"Oh no, he's at an old friend's house, someone he's known since grade school." She looked at me reflectively, but it seemed that was all she had to say. Yet, she was still sitting in my kitchen, looking around at my appliances and cupboards, and not really at me after that one considering glance.

"Well, and how are you getting along, Pam? How is Rob?" I asked desperately, trying to fill the silence. It really was one of the "awkward" kind you hear so much about.

"Oh, I'm fine, he's fine," she answered vaguely, which left us exactly nowhere. Suddenly her face brightened, and she asked, "Would you mind if I had another cookie? They're really good."

"Of course, Pam, help yourself. I'll even give you the recipe if you want."

"That would be great. Wow, they are rich!" It was one of my chocolate granola crunches, but it wasn't any sort of old family secret or anything, I'd gotten it off a cereal box from when granola first hit the market and when people still thought it was really healthy to eat loads of carbohydrates and nuts all gooped up with tons of honey.

"Would you like something to drink? Coffee, or tea?"

"No, thank you, I'm good. Well, maybe a little water. I'm going to put on five pounds from just two cookies." She kept eating, took a drink of water, chewed for what seemed forever, took another drink, and then said, "I saw Evy today."

I found myself on the alert. As casually as possible, I glanced over my shoulder at where Charlie sat out on the deck smoking. His back was as straight and stiff as always, but it was impossible to tell whether or not he had heard. Damn it all, why did it have to be so warm an autumn? If only the weather were cold, the sliding door and not the screen would've been between us. But then, if he had been smoking as he was now, in all likelihood he would've been underfoot in the kitchen getting it firsthand. Keeping as noncommittal as possible, I said, "Oh, yes? How was she? We haven't seen her for a while here."

"Oh, she looked quite blooming." I thought about what Charlie sometimes said about a person who irked him: "the flower of his family, a blooming idiot." Almost as if she rushed it out before she could regret it or stop herself, Pam blurted, "She was with a friend of hers, a man named Blaise something, he sounded Italian or French or maybe Mexican."

"Oh," I said, "she introduced you?" There surely couldn't be much harm in it if she had introduced a family friend, lurid as the whole thing had looked to Charlie.

"Well, not so much introduced me as—well, the fact of the matter is, he's a neighbor of the Carters in that new luxury rental district where they recently moved, over by Mills Pond Way. Mostly singles, you know, and a few young couples. Reynolds Crescent, it's called. When I went by there this morning to see Fanny Carter about setting up the Parents' Conference Luncheon, I had to park down the block a way because of all her

other guests. When I walked past what I guess is Blaise's apartment unit, he was holding open the door for Evy. She was hobbling up the sidewalk; I think she had just broken her heel off because she was holding one shoe in her hand."

"And she introduced you?"

"Well, she didn't see me at first, and I called out to say 'hello,' not really sure it was her. She stared at me as if she didn't know who it was for a minute, and then said, 'Oh hi, Pam, this is my friend Blaise. I'm going in to look at his house.'"

"Huh," I said, trying to keep my tone level and unsurprised as if I knew nothing of what she was talking about, but also without alarming her with my ignorance.

"Is he a realtor or something? Or an apartment complex owner?" Her glance was very piercing as she tried to invite comment.

I gestured toward the cookie plate questioningly to ask her if she wanted more, and she shook her head no, still watching me. All I said was, "Well, he may be. She and Donald meet a lot of people at the agency, and he has a good few business contacts." I cleared the table of all but her water glass, upon which she still had a firm grasp. I was convinced that the best way of putting an end to our *tête-à-tête* was to block off the use of all her props in this little drama.

She was watching me still, but was clearly disappointed. "Oh well, I thought you might know him."

"No, but we don't really mix much socially with Donald's and Evy's friends, you see. Like as not he *is* a realtor, or some single friend of Donald's who needs Evy's advice about decorating or something." That put the ball clearly in her court to contradict my suggestion that he was really Donald's friend.

She looked doubtful, but only said, "He was an odd bird. He had a very showy looking Jaguar, and was really well-dressed. He just bowed very slightly at the introduction, said 'It is my pleasure to meet any friend of Evy's' with some sort of weird accent, and then they went in without a backward glance."

I achieved what I considered to be a shrug worthy of any stereotypical Gallic master himself, and said, "Oh well, depend upon it, they've met somewhere through Donald's business." Best to change the subject now, I thought. "Is Jeffrey going to be coming on Thursday, or what? Either way is all right, but if he's coming I'll have Charlie stay here to be with him, and if not, Charlie can drive me where I need to go himself. Don't worry about it if you don't know yet, I'm sure you can let me know tomorrow."

For a moment we locked glances, but I'm glad to feel that my determination was the stronger of the two. She might think what she liked, and evidently there had been something, some visual indication in the encounter that didn't add up right at the scene, but she'd never get a word about it out of me. She floated away through the dining room and the front room, passing an insincere and inattentive compliment or two on my new rocking chair, which had been there for a month, not that she'd bothered to notice before. I followed her to the very edge of the porch to make sure she was gone, and then quietly made my way back into the kitchen, trying to figure out what to tell Charlie.

As it turned out, I didn't have to tell him anything at all. Pam's voice had carried, whatever mine had done, and he was seething and all excitably engaged in pacing the room when I came back in. He took one angry look at me and shot out, "What the hell kind of name for a man is 'Blaze?' What is he, some sort of gigolo or male stripper?"

That was ludicrous, and I said softly, "I rather fancy he's French or Spanish, Charlie, and his name is Blaise, B-l-a-i-s-e. And though it may happen in a larger place for all I know, I don't imagine you get a fancy car and an expensive apartment around here by stripping."

"What the devil do I care how his name is spelled? Has Evy lost her mind?"

"Charlie Canterfield, did you hear how I answered Pam? I wasn't just being tactful. He may actually be someone Donald knows through business, and Evy may have a legitimate reason for being there."

"Legitimate, my eye. And the way she's going about it, she's likely to have something illegitimate before she knows what hit her."

I smiled at him. "Women don't usually have to worry about that any more, Charlie."

He glared. "Is that supposed to be comforting?"

"It should be. We know your first grandchild is Donald's, she's the spitting image of him, and if you can keep from acting like an Old Testament patriarch and blowing your stack at Evy, maybe we can nudge her back in the right direction. Even assuming that she's out of it." More to myself than to him, I meditated, "And assuming that Donald *is* the right direction."

He made a sort of growling sound like a cornered bear. "You really burn me up sometimes, you know that?"

"Why, because I think people are sometimes better off getting a divorce?"

"Is that what you think? That Evy would be better off divorcing Donald after what, twelve years of marriage and a new baby? You've read too many books!"

"Now, that's where you stop, you moody old coot. The better educated a person is, the wider experiences that he or she—"

"He or she, here we go again, for the love of Pete—"

"—that he or she has, whether through life, love, or art, the more suited he or she is to make judgements about life in general. Assuming always that it isn't a stupid person. And you right now are acting as if you consider not only me but your own daughter very stupid, and inferior. I'm really surprised at you, Charlie. You aren't too old or too young to have lived through the sexual revolution and women's liberation, you must have some clue as to what it's all been about."

"A pile of crap, that's what it's been about." But he flicked a tentative glance my way as he said that. Then fury returned and he slammed his fist against the edge of the kitchen sink, which by the wavering look on his face only made him think twice about doing it again. "Damn it!"

"What's really the issue here, Charlie? Whether Evy and Donald break up? Whether your grandchild has to split her time between two households? What people will say? What's making this so far non-incident such a problem for you to wrap your otherwise quite noble, honest, and intelligent head around?"

He actually stopped to think about that for a minute or two. He sighed, much as he hates to hear that sound from other people. He looked at me for a second, then sat down across from me. I heard him clear his throat. Then he said, very slowly, "It's like this. It's like this. You know, I've told you Evy takes after her mother?"

I nodded. "Go ahead."

"Just give me a minute, okay?" He paused, then continued after mustering some words, like a man who wants to get a mouthful of them out all at once. "Well, she really does remind me of her. Every time she comes by here and nags and fusses and scolds at me, I see her mother in her, and that woman was not what you would call liberated. She didn't need to be, she had enough fight in her to lick the world. She wasn't what you'd call 'come easy, go easy, God send Sunday.' I never thought I'd ever miss her; well, I mean I guess I loved her in my way, but after a few years of endless jawing and bitching, you just tend to shut it all out and try to put it behind you on a day-by-day basis. And we had a few good times too, especially when the kids were younger." He looked down at the table as if he were gazing into a deep dark well from which something was rising up to choke him.

"But now, there's something wrong with Evy, and it's as if her mother is gone all over again. Instead of fussing, which I can turn aside and shut out, she's like the cat who's after the cream with me, on the rare occasions when we even see her. I don't know if you've noticed it or not, but for the last two or three weeks, it's been Donald who's dropped off and usually picked up Alice. And he looks like a man fit to be tied."

"I've noticed." I had to admit that; it was the only way to share in Charlie's troubles fairly.

He looked up at me as if in repentance for his harsh words. That was Charlie, he never uttered an unfair thought in my hearing without repenting of it. Unless he was joking, of course, which he obviously had not been. He patted my hand. "I mean, I've got you now, and we're happy, aren't we?"

I nodded, my throat suddenly full, and my eyes welling up.

"Here, don't let's cry, Bella, or before I know it, you'll be off and running around with some gay deceiver."

I giggled. "Charlie, 'gay deceivers' are what women used to call falsies in bustieres."

"I know that, but I didn't think you did. I heard it from a great-uncle of mine. I had a teenaged crush on the girl with the biggest bosoms in the county, and every time she would pass us on the street and roll her eyes my way, he would wink at me and say, 'Just gay deceivers, Charlie.' And even though I was pretty sure that she didn't hear him, or at least didn't know what he meant, I nearly died with embarrassment. Anyway—" he was still holding my hand, and absent-mindedly stroking the back of it with his knobby and callused fingertips—"where were we?"

"You said something about how Donald looks lately."

He started with the recollection. "Yes, I was saying that. You know, just between me and you and the fencepost, Donald wasn't really my first choice as a son-in-law. Well, I mean, not that I was making the choices, but he just seemed too soft, too all suited up, too wishy-washy, to stand up to my Evy, who had a mind of her own even then. But during the engagement I got to know him a little better, and while they seemed to have a hard row to hoe what with him taking over the business on his own and all, within two years he had their new house all paid for, and Evy was dressing as nicely as a woman could want, and even talking about going back to school locally part-time. But she never did it."

"No," I said, resisting the temptation to push education as a virtue anymore for the moment.

But Charlie, as I said, isn't stupid. He grinned at me. "Yes, and I suppose you think that if she'd enrolled in Liberation 101 everything would be fine and dandy now."

I flicked the back of his hand with my fingernail. "Did I say anything?"

"Doesn't mean you didn't think it. But really, can't Evy see what this cretin is up to?"

"Does a man have to be a cretin to fall in love with someone who's already taken? Don't you think well enough of your daughter to think that someone other than Donald might find her attractive, and that it's not the worse thing in the world for her to have some overall admiration before she gets as old and wrinkled as the rest of us?"

He shook his head. "You're not old and wrinkled, just mature and well-seasoned and a bit plump, which is fine, because I like you that way. But Evy seems to have changed her entire personality. Why, she's always been the sort to tell that kind of man to go and peddle his papers somewhere else, and now she's outraging the whole town."

"Not the whole town, Charlie, just a few busybodies who would gossip about anything at all, and not outraging. People are just naturally curious about anything new they see. It's the novelty of it. I see a person I know. I expect to see someone else I know with them. Instead, I see a totally new individual accompanying them. I want to know what's what, just so that I can adjust my own expectations of them accordingly. That's really the way people operate. Probably most of the people Evy knows and some of the people you and I know would accept this Blaise without a murmur if Evy suddenly upped and married him on a second go-round."

"Please, spare me the vision!"

"I'm glad to see you've recovered your sense of humor. Though I must say, I'm surprised at Pam. I thought she and Evy were closer; I didn't think she was a gossip; and

yet here she comes, trying to get satisfaction from me, of all people. If there's anything to know, that must mean that Evy isn't keeping anyone in the loop." I drew a deep breath and said, "Sorry, old man. Unless you're up to a face-to-face showdown on the subject, you're going to have to live in suspense a little longer."

"I guess."

"No, I mean it. If she's visiting at his house, either there's nothing in it, or someone is going to drop a malicious or possibly well-meant hint in Donald's ear. Or both. Then the fat *will* be in the fire."

He looked at me, rubbed his chin, nodded, then narrowed his eyes and stared through the kitchen screen to the deck outside. "But that's not my role, you don't think."

"Playing the heavy and making common cause against Evy with your son-in-law? No, on the whole I think better not. Better be prepared with an open and a listening heart to anything Evy might choose to divulge to you."

"And you think she will? Talk to me about it, I mean?"

"Well, I don't think she'll talk to me; she may be friendlier to me these days, but she certainly hasn't accepted me as a mother-substitute, which is where it might be more natural to go. But you are her father. Wait patiently if you can, and for God's sake give the subject a rest. I don't mean for my benefit, although—but give yourself a break. Here, maybe we should go away somewhere for a day or two, take your mind off things."

He groaned. "Except that we're loaded down with blasted babysitting jobs from now to eternity."

"I mean this weekend. Why don't we go to that resort in Holderston where Tom and Julia Beth went a while ago? We don't have to take camping stuff, we can rent one of the

deluxe cabins with a king-size bed and all the amenities of home. And we will want heat, though it's still warm here. I'll bet it's fairly cheap now: it's almost the end of the season. And no hunters are allowed on that property, only fishermen."

"And this, and that, and the other thing. Okay, that seems like a good idea. What, get away Friday evening and come back Sunday evening?"

"Yes."

"Okay. But if it's all right with you, I think I'll call the resort directly and we'll take our chances. I really don't feel like going to a travel agency for reservations now, and anyway Evy reamed me out properly a few months ago because you and I didn't go to her and Donald's Worlds Apart Travel when we went to the Caribbean. This way, I can say we did it all ourselves."

"Suits me. Shall I start putting out our things? I like to pack little by little, but I'll try not to pack anything you need this week."

"Go ahead, sweetheart, go ahead. I only hope we don't get disappointed."

"I don't think there's much chance of that," I said, smiling to myself. Suddenly, I was 'sweetheart' again. I almost thought we would weather this storm over Evy with flying colors. At least, Charlie was distracted for the time being, and we could spend some alone time away from home.

(Evy, Blaise)

"Oh, Blaise, your apartment is beautiful. It's almost as big as a house! In fact, it's like a small house. And the furniture!"

"Yes, it is all from the furnishing side of my uncle's business. It is very fine wood, you see. But let me give you some more champagne. It is almost never that I have anyone to share *mes belles accomodations* with. I am a little lonely here."

"I suppose I shouldn't, but I guess we can celebrate the completion of your living room décor. Ah, this couch! Who would've thought it was possible to sink into leather this way?"

"Yes, please to make yourself *comfortable*. I will be just a moment. I have something for you."

"Something for me?"

"Yes, a small gift, to exchange for the gift you have given me today, the peck of the cheek. No, *assieds-toi près de moi*, here. I will put it on your neck, your neck like a lily-stem, gently dropping."

"Drooping, do you mean? But what is that, in the case?"

"Here, you see? It is perhaps a bit plain, but *j'avait peur* that perhaps you would not accept of a more—how is it?—ornate present. It is an agate or what you may call a chalcedony, set in an eight-rayed star of silver."

"Oh, Blaise, it's lovely! But I can't accept it; I don't think Donald would like it if I did. Not that he need know where it came from, I guess, I often buy jewelry. But I wouldn't like to deceive him."

"But this gift is one that you may even wear to church with a good conscience. The man who sell it to me tell me that it is in—*qu'est-ce que c'est*—The Book of Revelations, where it is the—the third foundation of the walls in the holy city of Jerusalem. So, you see, I bring you something, *c'est bon*."

"What are you doing?"

"I am only placing it around your neck. I like to see you in my gift, in my house. For you give me the inspiration, *ma fleur*, you are my holy city of Jerusalem."

"Blaise, you can't touch me like that. Blaise....oh, God!"

A whisper. "You like that I stroke your back just there?"

A response. "We can't...I can't...there's Donald."

"Yes, *there* is Donal'. *Et nous sommes ici*. We are here. Please to let me hold you close, we are such good friends. I will never hurt you."

"If we're friends...if we're friends...why are you kissing me like that?"

"Because, *m'amie*, we are such *good* friends."

"But...no, please, my dress...Blaise...let me up, no."

"Why do you say 'no?' Your skin is all covered with goose lumps. Ah, *ma douce*, you are so *pur*, so gentle, so untouched. Let me to touch you and bring out your fire!"

"My fire? I'm married!"

"Yes, and who knows that better than I? I, so lonely, so without you. Please, I want to hold you close and we will make ourselves happy in this unfair prison of a world!"

The first toppling of the ramparts. "If I let you hold me...will you promise not to do anything else?"

"Only what you want me to do, *m'amie*. You will be my conscience and my guide."

(Evy)

Me as his conscience. Oh, I feel terrible about it. But so wonderful at the same time. He's right, Donald is very trite and stupid and boring. Oh, Blaise is always careful not to tell me what he really thinks of Donald, he's so tactful, but he probably wonders how I ever mixed myself up with such a stick. And the way Blaise touches me...it's as if I've never been touched before. Blaise has agreed not to tell anyone, and I suppose that now we have to be very careful of what we do together in public. I wish we could spend a night together, but I can't think of how to get away from Donald and the baby. The baby. I wish she were Blaise's baby. Then we could go and live in France and be happy. The only thing that bothers me is what Blaise said when I sort of hinted that he and I might make a good couple.

He said, "Ah, but you have a good life now, my Evy; you have a rich husband who works too hard to worry that you are away, and a rich lover who loves you and your precious baby and wants only to give you gifts and amuse you. To have the best of both worlds, as I have heard it said, that is it. I would not like to take you away from your situation of advantage. It would make me to feel so guilty." And then he looks at me out of his great, sad eyes and I see how he's suffering about all this. It's a good thing I'm not Catholic like he is, because I don't have to go to confession and tell anyone. Of course, he said he wouldn't tell anyone; when I pressed, he answered that he is a "lapsed Catholic," whatever that means.

I did tell my friend Angela something about it after the first time that Blaise and I were together, but she's the soul of discretion and besides I know things about her that

she doesn't want told. I hate to think of it that way, but I'm trying to be as practical as Blaise is about all this, and not worry so much that someone will find out. I only wish that we could go away somewhere together and enjoy each other's company where no one knows us who could or would gossip about us. But it's easier to get through the days and nights with Donald now, in a funny way. He doesn't seem to expect sex anymore, or at least gives up easily, and I always have Blaise to look forward to, usually at my lunch time or in the afternoons. Of course, Donald doesn't like it that I'm away so much when we're paying for a nanny and relying on Dad and Dot to babysit so that I can work. But unless Donald really changes his stripes and produces an all-out hostility session, I can put up with a little sulking for the sake of what Blaise and I have. I've tried to be nicer to Donald too, bringing him treats and things when I go back to the agency so that he can't get mad at me. I can't wait until the day comes, as I hope and trust it will, when Blaise decides he loves me enough to take me away somewhere else. Dad won't like it at all, I'm sure, but I can't help that. He married again to suit himself, and so should I, when the opportunity comes.

(Charlie, Donald, Dot)

I was sitting on the porch, minding my own business, when up drives Donald. It was a little chilly, and I had almost thought of going in, but my sweet woman had just brought out my old sweater with the pockets mended, as good as new, so I was enjoying the crisp fall air, and watching the leaves twirl down. Actually, I think she had probably come out to check on me and make sure I was okay, which I was at the time, because she's gotten it fixed in her head that the porch is my "pouting place," as she calls it, and that if I'm sitting out there something's troubling me. I had my coffee and had just read the paper, wondering why I still took it when there was so little news. But as Dot has noticed, I have this stubborn streak, and I like to see the newspapers putting up a fight against being driven out of business by the Internet, even though we have to pay more for the local gazette now, and get less for it. Not that we are total computer illiterates, but Dot uses our laptop more than I do, and knows more about how to run it. When I was still working, that's what I had secretaries for, to know what to do with the blasted things.

Donald, always the proper one, stepped up onto the porch and approached me, hand out. He's the old-fashioned one, I don't have occasion to shake hands with many people now. People just don't observe the courtesies as much as they used to.

"Dad." He called me that and nodded as our hands met.

"Well, Donald, out on a lark today? What's up, the baby need looking after? Is she with you?"

"No, Dad, we just got back from church. Evy has Alice. She said she was going over to Angela's for a while. She seems to spend a lot of time there lately." Donald no longer

looked generally irritable as he had for the first few months after the baby was born. Now he looked peaked, and all the soft tendency to fat had melted away. He was lean and pale, and taller than I had recalled, possibly the effect of seeing him in his Sunday best, which if possible was even dressier than the business suits he perpetually wears. Even weeks ago, I noticed that they hung on him loosely, as if he needed to have them all altered. Poor man, though, if only he knew it, he might be having bigger problems than losing weight and needing his suits altered. He was looking at me with a question when I glanced back up at him, and I wondered if he did know, possibly something more than I did. It was hard to tell.

"May I sit with you for a while, Dad?" Only Donald would ask for permission.

"Sure, Donald, sure. Just pull over the rocker, or the other chair if you're not a rocker fan. Here, I'll scootch over a bit and give you some room. Park your feet on the railing there if you want, it's nailed solid. Tom and I did a repair job out here this summer. Do you want something to eat or drink? If you just came from church, you must be hungry. Hey, Dot! Dorothy!"

"No, don't trouble Dot on my account, Dad. I'm not really hungry." He sighed. I just can't explain it, but I hate it when people do that. It seems there's always trouble coming when they do. He had never impressed me as a sigher, but now I could feel that I was about to hear something I wouldn't like, and all by way of that sigh.

Dot poked her face around the door at about that time, but I shook my head at her, and waved her away behind Donald's back. Whatever was coming, I might as well take it like a man and a father, and a father-in-law, for that matter, a man who had represented his daughter as an honest woman to the man who had married her. Not that I thought of

it as my fault, but something was clearly wrong somewhere. Maybe she had needed more, not less experience with men before marriage. I retreated from that thought; it sounded like the kind of thing Dot would say.

"So, Donald. How's life treating you?" I sounded falsely bright to my own ears, and of course it was a flat-footed question, but what else could I do? He didn't catch me out in an insincerity anyway, he was too worried about something on his own account.

"Well, Dad, I have to tell you, life hasn't been the same since the baby came."

"You don't say!"

He looked at me a minute as if he almost suspected me of sarcasm, which Dot calls "irony" for some reason, though I think that's just her fancy literary dressing up of the matter. But he was clearly lower than a snake's belly and after a minute, he looked away again without comment.

"Well, you know Donald, babies require a lot of care and keep a lot of people busy and up at night. Likely you just need more sleep. Things are always different after a good eight hours of shut-eye. Are you sure you're not hungry? You've gotten awfully thin, my boy."

"No, Dad, I'm really not hungry. I'm depressed, I think, if this is what it feels like."

"Baby healthy? Evy okay? How's the business, good or not so good?"

"We're all in good health. We've had a few reverses at the agency, like everybody else in this economy, but we still have our heads well above water. People never can stop where they are, they always want to go somewhere else, no matter how poor they get."

"But you're sad."

"Evy, Dad...is not the same as she was. Outwardly, I mean, she looks the same, except that she spends more of our money on clothes and hair, getting her nails done and jewelry. Come to think of it, she never shows me a bill for any of it; I guess somehow she's paying for it all out of her salary, though occasionally she used to have to borrow from me before, back before Alice came along. Anyway, she's nice to me all the time now, and...well, I don't mean to imply that she wasn't before, but—you know Evy. Set on having her way, and unless it's been something I felt strongly about, I always just gave in. It never seemed worth fighting about."

"Yeah, I know." I could see that I was in for it now, but he was still a man groping along in the dark, so maybe we wouldn't have to go the full distance there and then, I thought.

Donald gasped and wrung his hands, in desperation it seemed. "Dad, that business is my life, or what I have made of it, and now Evy treats it like it's just a bus stop or something. She's always out now, but she's not usually with Alice, and then sometimes she decides on the spur of the moment to take the baby with her when she goes out from home, and twice the nanny has gotten really angry and threatened to quit because of the loss of her hours. So, to keep her happy, I've had to have a showdown with Evy, and I pay the nanny bi-weekly now. I'm not even sure how many of the days I pay for she's really with Alice or is just watching our tv and eating our food."

"You mean Evy."

"I mean the nanny, Dad, Evy's not home enough to watch tv or eat our food, or so it seems. I see her in the evenings after work, and we share the same bedroom. And that's all we share, Dad." Donald wouldn't be more explicit, but I could guess that part of his

leanness wasn't due to literal hunger. The man was lovesick or whatever you call it, and his dreams weren't coming true the way he thought they should. And if ever there was a "two-car family with a white picket fence" man, it was Donald.

But counseled by Dot, whose word in this matter I thought of as being better than my own, I still didn't think I should share my own frustration with Evy with her husband. It put me in an uncomfortable position, because I'm not really an acting man. After a minute or two of near silence, during which Donald tried my patience by unshipping another sigh or two, I said, "Well, women sometimes take things differently, my lad. Give her some time, maybe she'll come around." It sounded fairly useless, but Donald had more in store for me.

"Dad...?"

"Yes, Donald."

"Do you think—do you think women alter their appearances for other women?"

"Do I what?"

"You know. I mean, do they highlight their hair, and wear fancy clothes, and all that, for other women?"

I laughed at what I thought of as the naïveté of the question. "Of course they do! Why, it isn't really a man's opinion of women that causes them to spend so much, it's their competition with each other that drives them into that sort of stuff. Not but what I guess they're in competition for men after all. But their habits are to imitate and criticize each other's styles and—"

"I'm not talking about that kind of woman, I'm talking about the other kind."

"What other kind?" Now I was the one who was in the dark; not that Donald left me that way for long.

"Well, I was just thinking...you know that—that gay actress on tv, that Renata Rollins that's on PBS sometimes, the one that used to be with the Old Vic."

"What about her?"

"She wears makeup even offstage in her interviews; I mean I guess it's still not offstage, but she wears regular makeup, not stage makeup. And our associate minister at the church is gay, and just two weeks ago she preached a sermon on the saying that "it takes all kinds to make a world." And after the service, when we went to shake hands with her, she had on this—this really knockout perfume." He looked at me as if he was almost afraid of what he was thinking.

After I followed the line of this discussion back to Evy, where it had left off, it seemed, I said, "So you think Evy might be fixing herself up more to find a woman?"

"Or because she's already got one."

I had a belly laugh then, probably the only one this whole thing is going to get me. "No, Donald, I really don't believe my daughter is gay. What on earth made you come up with that absolutely loopy idea?"

"Well, she seems to be always either coming back from Angela's or going over to Angela's, and she's always made up and perfumed and everything like she's going to a party. At first, I thought she was just wanting to come the high and mighty over Angela, because she took the baby with her, to show it off I thought, and because Angela is still unmarried. When Evy and I were first dating, she used to fix Angela up with some man or other and we would double date. But Angela never liked the men, she always thought

they were too stuffy or too boring or too something, and I guess I just thought...well, what's the use of dressing up like that if you're just going over to a friend's house, and the baby might spit up on your shoulder, or have an accident in your lap? Unless the friend is someone really, really special to you."

I glanced toward the door, but Dot was evidently back in the house somewhere. Surely it wouldn't hurt to give this suffering man the hint. If anybody had the right to know and do anything about it, he did, and he wasn't the type to take a shotgun and blow anyone's brains out. I measured my words out as carefully as I could, seeming to consider the matter for the first time, I hoped. "Now, Donald, listen to me. Evy has been through pregnancy, which has to some degree restricted her movements and her habits for almost a year. It's probably natural that she'd want to get out more and do things with her friends. Hell, for all you know, Angela is dressing up too. Maybe they're having Tupperware parties with the girls. My first wife used to dress up for those, God knows why. No, if she were dressing up for anyone special to her, and I do say maybe, then it would probably be a man. Are you sure she's not trying to attract *your* attention?" Introduce the idea, but not too abruptly, ease it in, and leave him to think about it. I thought I had done just fine.

He wrinkled his brow up though, and went straight to where I didn't want him to go, at least not on my front porch. "So you think she may be cheating on me with a man?"

Quickly, I said, "I didn't say that."

"But you said—"

I spread my hands helplessly. "I'm just going on what you've told me, Donald; Evy almost never comes by here anymore. She's nicer to me too, if that makes any difference

to you. Maybe she's not so tightly wound now that she's had a baby. I'm just looking at the facts as you've put them before me, I haven't seen her to confirm the truth of what you see in her. I might see something else." He waited, and kept looking at me, but I stuck to my guns and refused to budge or say another word. Better to change the subject. "The lawn is almost totally covered with leaves, and there's another overall in the garage, one more your size. Want to help me rake leaves, or do you need to go somewhere?"

He glanced at his watch and jumped up. "Dad, I promise I'll come back and help you before the week is out, but I do need to get back now. Just in case Evy comes in. Just in case." He paused. "Thanks. For our talk, I mean. You've helped me clear up some things, and given me something to think about."

Just as long as you do it away from here, I thought. He went through his usual good-manneredly goodbye windup, and darted off toward the car like a man with an urgent mission. I looked up at the sky, and felt the wind get a little chillier and a little wetter. Yeah, it was going to rain. Just then, Dot opened the door and said, "Okay, Charlie, I let you alone. Now tell me, how's Donald doing?"

"Not too good. Let's have lunch and I'll tell you all about it."

(Dot, Charlie, Donald, Evy)

Dot was nervous, and I was nervous, and in short, we had spent the morning snapping at each other and dropping things, and rearranging what we'd already arranged several times. Why all the fuss? I asked myself, and even asked Dot, but as usual she knew the answer, and come to think of it, so did I. It was simple: Evy was coming over with Donald and the baby when he came to rake leaves. Why the man got it in his head that it was some sort of firm social commitment, I thought at first, I would never know, but Evy had called and asked to speak to me. I frowned and shook my head at Dot, but she stared at me in that meaningful way of hers and kept moving the receiver up and down in front of my face, so I had to be there whether I really felt like it or not.

"Well, Evy, how are you? What can I do for you?"

"Dad, Donald said you wanted to see me."

Blast that Donald! Expecting me to help him with what was clearly his situation now, whatever it might have been before I tried to give up worrying about it and keep my health. "Oh?" I said, not able to think of any reason why I might want to see her, other than the fact that she was my daughter, who was up to something, and I was her father, who was up to something in my own way too.

But instead of acting sharp and irritable with me, like Evy of old, she laughed charmingly into the telephone and said, "Dear Dad! Well, do you want to see me, or not? Shall I come along and help rake leaves too?"

"Rake leaves?" The picture in my mind of an Evy with her hair tied back in a ponytail wearing blue jeans and a work shirt and raking leaves like in the old days didn't go with

the alternate picture that had formed willy-nilly in my mind of a painted trollop with two-inch long talons and stiletto heels, the result of Donald's confidences.

"Dad, are you okay?" A hint of real concern in her voice. "Is everything okay with you? With Dot?"

"Sure, we're fine. Is everything okay with you and Donald?" Two could play that game, I thought.

"We're fine too, Dad. Just swell." She laughed again, kind of inappropriately this time, I thought. If I wasn't going to take a risk, she certainly wasn't.

I tried to think again why I might want to see her, but could think of nothing else but to say, "Well, I just hadn't seen you for a while. Wondered how you were doing," my voice trailed off vaguely.

"Oh, you know, I've been busy. Here and there. Been spending a lot of time with one of my friends. Donald said you asked him over to rake leaves."

"Well, I just thought he might want to do it for the exercise, you know. He stopped by a few days ago, and there were lots of leaves down, and I just figured—but he doesn't have to come for that, I wasn't just trying to put him to work."

"Why not, Dad? That's all he does is work. Donald doesn't take exercise." The boldfaced sneer was what shocked me; if she didn't like him that way, why had she married him? And what a time now to be announcing it, and in what a manner! I wondered if Donald was listening on the other end, and as irritated as I was with him, I hoped he hadn't heard that. The old Evy could be bossy and bitchy and naggy and absurd, but this was a new level of arrogance for her, making fun of the man who had provided for her and enabled her to provide for herself. Somebody had to set her straight,

and I had a feeling that job was going to get delegated to me sooner or later, whether I liked it or not. I sat wishing that Donald would just tell her what's what, but if wishes were horses, then beggars might ride, and I could see that I was so far horseless. With my eye on Dot for approval, I tried for the best way to play it, and she nodded along as she got my drift, and waved her hands around in a manner I didn't fathom at the time to indicate something else I didn't get. Later she told me she was trying to say, "Hurry up and wind it up, you're making her suspicious." How I was supposed to get that from her signals, I still don't know. The upshot of it all was that we arranged for a family party on the following Saturday afternoon, this afternoon, when the weather was supposed to be unseasonably fine. And as we had found of the weather when we arose, it at least could be counted on to play ball. The sun shone, the wind was gentle in the trees, no rain, no gusts, no snow yet. If only the other business of the day were as simple as raking leaves.

When they showed up around one-thirty, Donald was out of the car first, getting the baby in her seat out of the back. Always correct, but somehow funny even in his correctness, he was wearing a pair of perfectly new blue jeans, and a much-washed though still new-looking button-down cotton shirt, tucked in and cinched with an expensive-looking leather belt. After depositing the baby seat on the porch by Dot, where she sat in the rocker, he went back for a new dull green overall and brought it to the porch.

He said something to Evy as he opened the passenger door for her, but she took her royal time getting up to where we were. I almost didn't recognize her even though I did, and that's the God's truth. It wasn't so much what she was wearing, although she had chosen to wear clunky silver and turquoise jewelry with her blue jeans and work shirt,

something Evy of before would never have done. Even I knew by looking that it was too expensive to do yard work in. And she had her hair tied back, but it was longer, and in an ornate bun instead of a ponytail, with all sorts of little turquoise flowers pinned in here and there. The work shirt wasn't one I recognized from her younger days, either. It had a bright red and turquoise plaid, and her mouth was perfectly made up in a matching red lipstick. She too was wearing blue jeans, a bit faded, and I noticed with relief that she had worn sensible shoes. Then I noticed that they seemed new too, and looked trendy and pricey, like most of the things she was wearing.

The real surprise was the way she carried herself, and the way she walked. It was self-confident and proud, strutting and vain, or so it seemed to me, compared with the matter-of-fact way Evy had always moved before. And she was absolutely beautiful and breathtaking. She made her way slowly up the walk, apparently enjoying the day and not really looking directly at any of us, as Dot tried to catch my eye and express something and I tried to ignore it.

As Evy reached the lowest step, I heard a deep intake of breath from Dot, and then she held out her hand with welcome and said, "Evy. Come up and say hello to your father. It's been so long since we've seen you, my dear."

I dreaded the response, but Evy smiled radiantly, instead of freezing Dot out where she stood there in her plain blue and white jogging suit, her matronly figure in clear contrast with Evy's. "Thank you, Dot. How is the old codger, anyway?" Her tone was affectionate and lilting, and she softly squeezed Dot's outstretched hand as she passed.

Almost garbling her lines from sheer panic, Dot said, "Oh, I—I don't know, all right, I guess. Why don't you ask him?" She seemed to light on this last as a sudden inspiration,

then muttered, "I'll be back out in a minute, I've got to, got to go and—" and we saw and heard no more of her on the porch for about a good ten minutes, though I could hear dishes and silverware sounds from the kitchen, and could smell coffee brewing. Good old Dot, the love of my life. Her constant remedy, feeding and cosseting people, stood her in good stead this time. It gave her something to do with her hands, which I had noticed were not entirely steady while she watched Evy approach.

Evy perched herself on the porch railing and smiled down at me, like a woman posing for a calendar photo. "And how are you, Dad? How's Dot? Is life treating you kindly?" she asked tenderly. Somehow, it seemed wrong for a man to be looked at in that manner by his own daughter, but Evy was evidently resolved to try and flirt her way out of this one, if she even had any idea what had been going on between all of us behind the scenes.

I was clear now on one thing: there *was* something going on somewhere. There was no longer a doubt in my mind, not the hint of a shadow of a ghost of a doubt that she was doing something she oughtn't. Well, I mean, she was my daughter Evy, not a damned vamping movie star, and though I might not be able to tell her that her performance wasn't outwitting me, that wasn't the same as tamely standing for it. If she'd been another girl growing up, she might have gotten 'round me more often with that sort of stuff, but she hadn't been, and I wasn't, and there was an end of it.

"Oh, I don't know, Evy, maybe later you and I can have a walk around the block, and a bit of a chat. I fancy Dot has heard enough about all my troubles for now. Not that I really have many, you know, but I haven't seen you for a while." That shook her out of the trees a bit; her eyes widened for a second, but the very next one she was beaming at me again.

"Of course, Dad, I'd love to stroll with you on such a nice day. We could go now if you like, while Donald starts the leaves."

Oh no, you don't, girlie, I thought. We're going to go on *my* terms. "No, I think we should all work at the leaves together for a while. That way, no one works too hard or slacks off too much. Want to lay that fancy set of gewgaws aside before you start? Don't want to lose any of it, I'll bet."

"Dear old Dad! I've never lost anything I really cared for yet. Anyway, don't worry, turquoise is only a semi-precious stone. If a piece falls out, I can always have it replaced." She sighed, and stretched her arms over her head luxuriously, like a woman awaking from sleep. She really was a sight for sore eyes. "Putting me to work on a Saturday! And Donald and I have already worked half-day today."

"Are you too tired?" I ventured, hoping that she hadn't added sloth to her other new qualities.

"Too tired to rake your leaves, Dad? No, never!" she exclaimed, jumping so suddenly off of the railing that I jerked back, my reflexes tense and nervy. She turned to Donald, who had quietly found a rake and had been proceeding to rake for the time she and I had been talking. "Donald! Where's my rake?" But instead of answering, he just lifted his head, staring at her at first as blank as an idiot, or as if hearing a foreign tongue. Then, he silently pointed to where three more rakes were leaning against the porch on the lawn.

She pouted her lips out, but he didn't see her, looking down at the ground as intently as he was. Things were bad, I thought, very bad. Now Donald wasn't talking to her, or at least so it seemed. In fact, he hadn't spoken to her once since they arrived, excepting the brief words they exchanged at the side of the car when they pulled up.

"Hey, Dot!" I called out, and Dot dithered out from the kitchen, smiling a little too broadly. "Here, bring that coffee out and put it on the table if you're going to, we're starting to work." I picked up my rake and found a spot on the lawn well away from the porch, where I could watch things as they developed, if they did. Dot came down after announcing that the coffee urn was there, and unnecessarily going into a lot of detail about everything else. She finally picked up a rake and started toward me, but I shook my head in a quick negative, and she had to be content with being nearer to the porch. Let's work the Jezebel for a while, and then see how she feels about flirting, I thought, then was amazed at the depth of my anger toward my own daughter. After all, she did look nice, and I had to conclude, since there were no raven-haired lovers around, that it was for our benefit. But how exactly did she mean it? That was the million dollar question.

With the four of us working, though stopping for Dot's coffee and cinnamon rolls as we did from time to time, the lawn didn't take long. The leaves had been deep, but we had them all bagged up in large black garbage bags and sitting on the curb for the compost truck to pick up on Monday in about an hour or two. In fact, we had broken once because, improbable as it seemed in the situation, Evy had laughingly jumped in a tall pile of leaves and flapped her arms back and forth as if making a snow angel, then risen in the midst of it and thrown leaves at all of us from a distance. She was absolutely irresistible; Dot gave me a pleading, wavering look, and even Donald smiled weakly. Awkwardly, I said, "Here now, Evy, behave yourself!" but I couldn't really be mad at her. She was so fetching and happy, on the surface at least. Then we all got close together and raked that pile up again, bagged it, and we were done.

I was walking toward the porch, about willing to call it a day and thinking it was really Donald's problem, when Evy caught up with me and touched my arm. "What about our stroll, Dad?" She turned to pick a leaf or two from her hair, and I'll swear I felt for a moment like Abraham asking Isaac if he wanted to go for a walk in the country and look for lost sheep. Then I steeled myself to it, and said "Sure, Evy, just let me put my rake away. Here, pass me yours, too." Dot was hovering on the porch giving last minute attentions to the coffee tray, and clearly about to ask them in for more substantial fare, which I knew she had ready. I caught her eye and gave a swift nod of my head toward the street. She knew what that meant. It was her advice after all, but she almost looked as if she repented of it. She cast a scared look over at Donald where he was checking on the baby, peacefully asleep all this time in her baby seat, and nodded back quickly in complicity. As Evy and I turned away, I heard her engage Donald in some kind of bright, meaningless-sounding conversation, and I sped up our pace before Donald could change his mind. I didn't know what or how much I could do, but nothing ventured, nothing gained, as the old people used to say.

"Well, Dad, and so what have you got to worry about, here in suburban heaven?" she asked, hooking her arm companionably in mine and flipping her eyes up at me.

I resolved not to let her fluster me right off the bat. "Oh, different things," I said airily, as if they were none of them very serious and slanting my eyes back down at her in what I used to think of when I was first courting as my debonair look. That was another game that two could play, though I was a mite rusty after all this time.

She gave a rich, gurgling laugh, deeper in timbre than I remembered her as having, but it tugged at me so because it reminded me of the way she had laughed as a baby, and the

way her own baby laughed. Don't let me shed a tear, oh God, I fervently prayed. Then the moment passed, and I heard her, as if at a distance, say "Like what? For example."

"Oh, for example—" I reached in desperation. "Like Tom. He needs to get married."

She snorted derisively, almost her old self again. "That'll be the day. Although—" she narrowed her eyes a moment, as if considering. "He does seem awfully taken with that new girl of his. Yes, Dad, maybe he'll marry her." Then she was her new self again, gaily prevaricating with me about something. "Next problem, Dad."

Stalling for time, I said, as if joking, "Oh, but I wasn't done with that one yet."

"No, I've decided. I get to be the match-maker, and I have determined that he will marry—Julia Beth, that's her name. Next problem," she insisted firmly, and gave a few of the hairs on my arm a tug, something she used to do to get my attention when small.

"Ouch, that hurts."

"It was meant to, you're not paying attention to me. *Attends-toi, monsieur*—" she stopped and gasped under her breath. Somehow, she had played right into my hands and betrayed herself, but I didn't know right away how to make use of it, since I wasn't sure what she had said, maybe some curse word, so I decided to pretend not to notice and gave her a chance to get out of it. After all, we were still too close to the house for me to work round to what I wanted to say, and I didn't want her able to just stalk back there and leave.

"And then, there's those gossiping old women I have coffee with at Ainsley's. Not that I have coffee with them much now," I finished as if to myself. I was ready to test her mettle, but after her last slipup, she probably was trying to figure how best to play her hand, not worrying about my intentions and strategies.

"Oh, really?" she laughed a little breathlessly, then said quickly, "Wait a minute, Dad, you don't know any old women like that. How dare you say that women are the only gossips! Men are sometimes a lot worse."

"I know, Evy, I know." Better seem defenseless against the charge of sexism and let her plague me a bit than let her sense the real strength of my hand right away. I glanced down at her, but she was looking ahead of us, and had a bright smile pasted on her face again, how genuine it was almost impossible to know.

"So, you don't like your old friends. If I didn't like my old friends, I would get some new friends, Dad." She hugged my arm even closer and looked up at me again.

"But what if my old friends missed me, Evy?"

"Then maybe they should treat you better, Daddy. I mean—maybe they should stop gossiping, if you don't like it." Once more she rolled her eyes innocently up at me. If I didn't know better, I would think she was about twelve and I was taking her downtown to buy her an ice cream cone.

Now was the time, if ever. "And have you found a new friend, Evy?"

She missed a step, but skipped to keep up with me. I was walking her at a fair pace now, determined to plant the charge and get out and leave Donald to handle his own wife from now on. I mean, this was wearing on a man. I was too old for this. No, not too old, but too happily settled, and not used to being treated like a fool by my own daughter. "A new friend?" she echoed wonderingly. I was not able to think I had imagined it all, but she had learned cunning from somewhere, and it sorely tried me to see it. They're not born knowing it, the way some real sexists say, but damned if some of them don't pick it up, maybe from some of the very men blaming them for it. That man she was involving

herself with must be a real twister, and no mistake. Blaze, indeed. I don't care how it was spelled. This wasn't my Evy, I knew that.

"Look here, Evy—"

"Yes, Dad?" She was evidently determined to hold up her side, but I had seen what I had seen, and had moreover a strong conviction now of what it meant.

"I worry most of all about you, Evy." Got her. Taking the soft tone with her was the right approach, as Dot had predicted. Her lower lip quivered an instant, and she glanced away to the other side. When she looked back, the tips of her mascaraed lashes were long and wet with tears she had been too game to be caught wiping away. She was plucky, I had to give her that.

"About—about me, Dad? But why? I'm happy." She suddenly didn't look so happy. She had looked happy all day, but now I could see there was a fox in the pulpit somewhere, thinking of that old picture Dot showed me one time. Something about a fox preaching to a flock of geese, or sheep, or something else edible. And here was a goose if ever I saw one.

"How can you be happy when Donald's not happy?" I had another stretch of block on one side of the turn we'd been making to reason with her before I figured she would cut and run, and all hell break loose.

Her voice got steely, though. "Did he complain to you about not being happy?"

"I have eyes, Evy," I evaded the issue. And before I could change my mind, I put in, "And it's not only Donald that I've seen with my eyes. I saw you some long time ago at the mall with a man who had his hands practically down your dress in the back, and you

were stopping off at that fancy lingerie shop. And having seen what I did, I can't help but wonder if—if Donald ever saw anything of what you bought there."

She drew a deep breath, and I thought for a moment she'd reached her limit, when she decided to face it out, somehow. "Well, Dad, since you're so busy spying on me and drawing your own conclusions, then I have to say that I think I have the right to have some friends." And having given me her shot of sauce, she defiantly unlocked her arm from mine, and linked her arms behind her like an old man strolling on a commons somewhere, an impression which went pretty oddly with the womanish swing of her hips as she walked.

"Some *kinds* of friends, yes, Evy, and some kinds, no." I had already made my point, and was just taking up further time until we were back, trying to reinforce what I'd said to her, if possible.

But she wasn't finished with me yet, either. "Well Dad, some *kinds* of friends become something else, something closer, in time."

"Are you talking about marriage, Evy?"

At first, she didn't respond. Then, by God, and for all I was against her I was with her, she said, "I might be."

"Might be? Evy, if you're going to change horses in mid-stream, best do it neatly and do it kindly. Don't keep everybody on tenterhooks."

That did make her hesitate, but only for a second. "Do you mean Donald?"

"Not only Donald, my girl, not only Donald. There's been talk already, months ago."

She said, finally, "Well, I suppose you might've told me sooner. Who was it, those 'gossiping old women,' as you call them?" But we were approaching the house from the

far side now, and she didn't seem disposed to continue much longer. This time, it was her stride that got a little longer and mine that shortened.

"That's who it was, all right. But you can't just dismiss it like that. Are you going to marry this—this—man, or not?"

I barely heard her as we turned onto the lawn, but she said, "Not everyone marries, Dad." Then even softer, as if only to herself in her heart of hearts, "But I'm working on it." Now, in all this long drawn-out mess of a situation, that at least sounded something like my Evy. She sped across the lawn and up onto the porch ahead of me, said something to Dot, something cheerful and loud, then went into the house hugging herself with her arms.

It had gotten colder, and though everyone else was in the house, including the baby, Donald waited for me out in my chair, of all places. He jumped up as I approached, his face wary and drawn, prepared for bad news but hoping for good.

"Donald," I said and nodded, taking a page from his politeness book, but he wasn't about to let me get past him into the house without a confrontation.

"Well, did she say anything? I mean, about someone else?"

I looked at him and thought, "If you had Evy's nerve, we wouldn't be in this situation now." But I only said, "We talked about lots of things, Donald, and it was a private conversation, between father and daughter. If you have problems to sort out with your wife, sort them out directly from now on."

He looked at me like a man who'd lost his last hope, but I went on in, and after a minute he came in after me, glancing around the room like a dog trying to gauge where the safest place is not to get kicked. Since Dot, to her great delight, had the baby on her

lap and was getting burbled at, and Evy was rearranging her hair in the mirror in the back of the room still, he made the right choice and sat by Dot. She took one look at his face, and handed him his daughter, glancing at Evy, who appeared not to notice the change of baby minders.

After a little while and in an atmosphere of total peace, we all ate a light meal, and soon after they went on home, Donald apparently comforted by the hospitality and Evy still indifferent to him, but talking to him in a milder tone. Dot made much of all three of them at the door, telling them to come back sooner next time, as if she really thought that were likely, then she turned to me, shut the door behind her, and let out a huge gust of breath.

I said, "I hope you don't mind, old girl, but let's leave it until tomorrow to talk about it, after I've had my morning coffee. Between the two of them, Evy and Donald have plumb tuckered me out." She nodded, and we went on up to get ready for bed, too tired to feel sorry or sad or anything much at all. So end most of the world's troubles, I suspect.

(Charlie, Dot, Jeffrey)

"Hi, Pam. Just a second, let me get Dot. Oh—me? Sure, what is it? Well, it's not much of a grass cutting season right now, but I was planning to give the lawn a look-see, and maybe trim some of the bushes. Does he *want* to help me? Well, okay, I guess a laborer is worthy of his hire, sure. Just let him ask me, okay? It'll put some iron in his drawers." A silence, then he grinned. "You don't say! Well, that's news for sure. Yeah, we'll be here all day as far as I know. Sudden love emergency, is it? Okay, send him right over. No, I've got all the shears and stuff we need, and the mower's in prime condition. Okay. We'll see him soon." He hung up the phone, still smiling to beat the band. He looked over at me. "Jeffrey has a crush."

"Oh, is that all? I knew that weeks ago. For heaven's sake, act right Charlie, and don't pester the boy about it. Remember that girl with the big bosoms you were once in love with, and see if you can resist taking your witty great-uncle as a model. And I thought I told you that I'm pretty sure it's the wrong season for trimming bushes. That's supposed to be done in the summer, when they're growing. This is late fall, almost winter. You'll kill them if you don't watch out."

He answered absently, apparently already putting the day's work schedule together in his mind. "I've trimmed those old bushes whenever I took a notion to, and they've grown almost more than I can keep up with them." He fingered his beard hairs, where he hadn't yet shaved and said, "It seems he needs money for a movie the girl suddenly elected to go to. I thought there was something up when he turned up here all those times in neater

blue jeans, but I guess I considered that maybe his parents had had some influence on him finally. Ah, young love!"

"Charlie, I'm warning you."

"Oh, let me enjoy it while I can, he's going to be here soon."

"Not a word, I mean it. And wipe that smile off your face, mister, you're enjoying it too much."

"Now Dot, I know better than to interfere with anyone you've taken under your wing. But if I have to play stupid when he gets here, let me get the smarts out of my system now, okay?" And he went humming off back through the house toward the downstairs bathroom still rubbing his chin, evidently planning to shave.

A bit exasperated but trusting him as well as I could not to say or do anything to embarrass Jeffrey, I shook my head about the bushes and thought "what a shame." Then, I revised it to, "Oh well, if he kills them, then he'll listen to me next time, and moreover he'll have some new planting to do next spring, which should keep him busy with his mind off things." If spring would ever come. I wasn't really looking forward to the winter. We'd already had one tiny snowfall which melted the next day, and the stillness outside and the melancholy of the leafless trees was affecting my own mood.

When Jeffrey appeared, he was bundled up in what looked like a new coat and thick old corduroys, with a cap on his head that didn't say anything but "Nike," for a change. I had to admit, he was a much handsomer boy now that he wasn't covered with skull shirts and pants with studs and chains hanging all over him. Not but what I'd always known he was a handsome boy, I told myself. Evidently his chameleon routine

was for the benefit of the female chameleon, but the rest of us were still a part of his audience that appreciated it.

His face empty of all but a distant twinkle in his eyes, Charlie had him out in the yard in no time. They consulted about what they were doing in the middle of the lawn, and watching them I thought of how many times I had seen this freemasonry of men in my life, men doing some job outside that required constant referral to each other's opinion and such things as coffee and doughnuts, sandwiches, and just plain goofing around. Which reminded me, I had to get the cups ready for their hot chocolate and the paper plates and things out, and cut some sandwiches to have ready for them.

For a while as I was busy in the house, straightening up the furniture and running the vacuum, I could hear the lawn mower in the distance, resounding loudly in the empty and echoing air. Then, it suddenly shut off, and I saw them standing by some of the bushes, making the occasional clips and snips, standing back and then moving forward to cut again. At first as I watched them, Charlie was gesturing at the greenery. Then, in the next instant, I saw him look at Jeffrey intently, taking in what he was saying or asking as if something important depended upon it. The next second he had cast a glance up my way, but I found myself starting back from the window, and I don't think he saw me. He half-turned with the shears still in his hand, and meditatively scratched the back of his neck, answering something in a serious manner. Every now and then, I looked out at them, and it was only after what seemed a long while that they went back to work, this time around the sides of the house and away from where I could see them.

When they came in, I fed them and gave them hot drinks, watching Charlie to see if he was going to say anything in front of Jeffrey that would let me into their little club, but

he studiously avoided my gaze and was actually jovial with the boy. Jeffrey seemed to have gained some confidence about dealing with Charlie too, and darted his eyes around as Charlie moved, following his movements, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed like a squirrel. How different he was from the lacklustre boy who had monopolized a good part of our time this summer!

When Jeffrey left, Charlie walked him to the door, and I followed at a slight distance, wondering how they would part and what would be said. Charlie took out his wallet and peeled off four or five crisp five-dollar bills, a lot too much, I thought, and extended them to Jeffrey, saying "Will this do you, pal?"

Jeffrey's eyes widened at the sight of so much more than he had expected. Full of gratitude and enthusiasm in a way even I had never seen him before, he exclaimed, "Wow, man—I mean, Mr. Canterfield, thanks!" After pocketing it carefully in his own money clip, he stuck it in an inside pocket in his jacket, waved, and was gone.

"Well, Charlie, I hope killing your bushes has been worth all that money you just parted with."

"Oh, don't fuss, old woman, don't you feed him and cater to him constantly?"

"I'm not old, and I don't spoil him, no. And what on earth were the two of you talking about for such a long time, out on the lawn?"

He paused, considered, almost as if he might not tell me, then poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table, gesturing for me to sit too. "Well, that's the funny thing. In connection with absolutely nothing, he all of a sudden up and asked, 'Mr. Canterfield'—you see, he addresses me properly now—'Mr Canterfield, do all married people cheat on each other?'"

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. Well that part hit a little near to home, and I was regretting having allowed him to help me, when he went on to say something like 'You see, there's this girl I like, like a lot, and I'm getting older now and want to do the right thing. Well, I just wondered, should I get used to having her around or not? I mean, if it's only going to end up in divorce, then what use is it to get married in the first place?' And I said, 'You're not planning to marry her now, are you? I mean, you're a little young to be thinking of that already.' And he looked me straight in the eye and said, 'I'm sure I like her though. But Mom and Dad used to like each other, to really love each other, and there are other people too—well anyway, Mom has been yelling at Dad a lot lately, and the other day I heard her accuse him of cheating on her.' Well, that's really none of our business, Dot, so I said to the boy, 'Now look, son, that's not the kind of thing you should be spreading around about your own folks. There's such a thing as family loyalty, after all.' He stalled around for a minute, then said, 'Well, I've been taking this class at school, a social studies class, and we heard all about how a marriage is supported by a community of people too, not just by the two people married to each other. And since you guys know us pretty well, I sort of thought that you're a part of our community, and I could ask you.' How they listen to all those crazy lyrics in that music of theirs and still can seem as innocent as all get-out, I'll never know, Dot."

"Well, how did it end up?"

"I just sort of told him that it was his folks' issue, not his, and that I was sure they both loved him; you know, the kinds of things you're supposed to say. Oh yeah, and I told him that people sometimes say lots of things they don't mean when they're arguing. I feel

sorry for the kid, but let Pam and Rob deal with it, we've got enough on our plates as it is."

"And that was it."

"That was pretty much it."

"Oh, Charlie, it seems like everyone's having problems. You remember I told you my lit. club had been cancelled. Well, Fay told me at the bookstore one day that it was because Beatrice, you know the woman whose house we met at, split up with her husband. At least, he split up with her. Left her for a younger woman, and took too much of their savings for her to keep the house."

"Oh, I remember about the book club, all right; that man—what was his name—Jimmy something—"

"Jimmy Knox?"

"Jimmy Knox. He called and said to tell you that it was cancelled. I put the note on your notepad, but you never said anything about it. Well, I guess we're the only ones free of troubles of our own, Bella." He clasped my hand. "As long as you don't get all tired of my troubles and take out on your own."

"Not likely, Charlie. Not very likely."

"Okay, then." And we left it at that.

(Tom, Julia Beth)

"What are you looking at now, Julia Beth, my love?" And I bent over her shoulder to see.

"Oh, fabric swatches for my wedding gown. I think I told you my aunt Grace is going to make it for me. She used to sew for the repertory in the capitol, and she's the one who originally got me hooked on theatre." She sighed.

I bent to kiss the ticklish spot under her ear, and asked, "Why are you sighing? Dad, you know, gets really up in the trees when anyone does that. Me, though, I have nerves of steel."

She said, "Well, it's a good thing, because I was going to ask you if we could put off the wedding a little. Just for a couple of months, or maybe till March. Have a nice spring wedding."

"Changed your mind? But I didn't get my 'dear John' letter," I teased.

"Don't be absurd. It's just that New Year's is so soon after Christmas, and a lot of people go away for both holidays and I just thought that we should re-think things before it's too late. After all, even though the church registry office has been phoning us repeatedly for a final date, we haven't picked one yet. And it's going to be such a small wedding that they can more easily arrange it."

"Did you want a larger one? I thought small was what we agreed upon."

"We still do." She whipped around in her chair and tried to get me involved in her new vision of things, tugging on my shirt sleeve and pulling me down to sit at the table with her. "I just thought we could more quickly organize a really big party, sort of our

engagement party, and have it just after New Year's, when everyone is back, and then have a much smaller or even a private wedding and a small reception in March."

"I didn't know that your friends in the theatre made such a production of going away for both winter holidays."

"My friends are full of surprises, Tom. Many of them not only celebrate, but are quite religious."

"Are you sure you're not just stalling?"

"Are you questioning my faith?"

"You mean your religious faith? I didn't really know you had any. I mean, I know we decided to be married at the church, but I thought we were doing that to keep Dad and everyone else happy."

"I don't mean that, I mean my faith towards you."

I considered. "No, I would never question that. But anybody can get last minute jitters, or so I've heard."

"Do you have them?" she retorted.

"No, I don't." Now *I* sighed. She was obviously really serious about this.

"So we're having a big engagement party after New Year's?"

She kissed me and patted my knee. "Yes."

"Is that traditional?"

"It doesn't have to be, does it? We might as well get something a little non-traditional in for ourselves. I mean, the size of the party may be traditional, and the fact that we're having it before the wedding, but nothing else much has to be. You'll see; people love a party for any reason at all."

"And where are we going to have it?"

"Oh, I know. Down at the Bruckmeyer Hall; they don't seem to get much traffic these days. I'm sure they'd be glad of the business."

"There may be a reason for their lack of business, like a leaky ceiling or something."

All decided now, she answered back at me, "Well, it can be your job to check stuff like that out, okay?"

"Okay, I guess so. And where are we going to have the small reception after the wedding? We seem to be running into a lot of expense, at least potentially."

"I have just the place. Suitable for about twenty couples, which is probably the limit we should set for the wedding, and the food is excellent."

"Where?" I asked warily, but I needn't have worried.

"When I told your dad and Dot that we might be planning something small in that way, they put their heads together and your dad told me we could have our reception there, if it wasn't too large."

Now I was really surprised. She had clearly been a favorite of Dad's and maybe of Dot's too from the word get-go, but that he would actually propose the loan of his house was a new all-time record of congeniality. I knew Dot wouldn't have come up with it all alone; she's too conscious of Dad's comfort. "Why didn't they say something to me? Why didn't you say something to me?"

"Well, I guess they thought since I was the bride, they should tell me first. And it slipped my mind, though I thought about telling you, because I was still trying to work out how to have one big party. Now, we can have a big engagement party, a small wedding, and a small reception. Okay?" she finished off brightly.

"Okay," I said, "sure." At least that meant that she had been giving lots of thought to our marriage and how to work everyone in.

"By the by, Tom, have you seen Evy lately?"

"Evy? No, why?"

"Well, I could ask either her or Dot to be my matron of honor, and though in my mind first spot goes to Dot, she's going to be doing the cooking for the reception if we have it at her house. I'll help her, of course, with some things, but it's going to be largely on her shoulders. I just thought she might want Evy to participate too, since she and Donald are also part of the family." This sudden interest in Evy seemed a trifle odd, but when I thought of how the morning had taken its abrupt turn, I don't suppose anything could have shaken me.

"Are you going to ask her, or am I supposed to?"

"Me, you idiot!"

"Well, I've never been married before, and I haven't sat behind the scenes with the prospective bride making plans, either."

She smiled at me, and then said, "I tell you what, Tom. I'm almost done here and ready to mail off these swatches to the supplier. Why don't you go out and bring us back some lunch from somewhere? Like from Sun Wong's Palace or something. We've still got some of that Long Trail lager that should go good with it."

"You mean it? You really want take-out food?"

"You've indulged me, so I'm indulging you. You're pretty good with a wok, but I'm not, hence the take-out."

"Hot damn! What do you want? Probably the eggplant with noodles and the mixed vegetable dish, right?"

"Oh, sure. And bring me back some spring rolls too, about four of them. They're really good there."

"I'll be back in a flash," I said, getting my boot laces into knots trying to unlace them and get into them before she changed her mind and called me back.

"And Tom?"

"Yes, my love, my life, my dear."

"It's snowing outside. Try not to get cold feet."

"You think you're funny, don't you? Got to have the last word."

She looked across at me, bowed like a geisha, and turned a key at her lips. I ducked my head back around the door to say something else to her a minute later, but she was already sitting down again, riffling through magazines and swatches. The door shut quietly behind me as I made my way to the elevator. Yes, it had been a really good idea to have her move in with me this summer. It had made her come to the point, for which I was heartily thankful.

(Dot, Charlie)

"It was a beautiful engagement party, don't you think, Charlie? Julia Beth was stunning in that rose caftan, and I never realized how handsome Tom is before." I stood in front of him for him to unzip my dress, and then wriggled out of it as gently as possible so as not to damage a seam somewhere. It had fit perfectly, a sea-green dress with floating wisps of material all around the long sleeves and the bodice, but I had eaten nervously some of the time, watching the couples we knew dance. And Charlie and I had gotten out on the dance floor ourselves for a few turns here and there, which had stirred up my stomach even more. I felt full and rather bloated, and got some Pepto-Bismol out of Charlie's nightstand, hoping that was the right thing to take. I very rarely took medicines of any kind willingly, but I knew Charlie swore by it.

"Well, it was a nice big party, certainly."

"Now don't lie to me, Mr. Canterfield, you had a great time watching all those actresses in their slinky dresses. They didn't really look like things I would wear to an engagement party, but they were beautiful, I have to admit that."

He grinned challengingly, and said, "I don't know what you mean."

"That's okay, Charlie, you're allowed to look."

"I spent more of my time watching Jeffrey and his girl in yellow stepping all over each other's feet. And for that matter, Donald and Evy weren't their usual graceful selves on the floor. Did you see him try to dip her, and Evy renege?"

"Was that what they were doing? It wasn't a tango, I couldn't think why he was trying to dip her."

"It came out looking like a man's attempt to be masterful and a woman's answering back. At least she didn't kick him in the shins, though."

"I wouldn't think she would. She still gets her way, but she's subtler now, more indirect."

"Yeah, I know all about that, remember?"

"Sorry, didn't mean to remind you. She looked kind of slinky too, in that tight electric blue thing. It really picked up her blue eyes, and set off her blonde highlights."

He took off his jacket and hung it over the valet across the floor, then stepped out of his pants and folded them neatly across the hanger there. "Yes, we were all gorgeous tonight, I think we can agree on that."

I started almost automatically to sigh, then repressed it and said, "What's the matter, Charlie, you didn't have a bad time, did you?"

"I had a swell time as far as partying goes, but I can't help but wonder when the other shoe's going to drop."

"You mean with Evy and Donald?"

"I mean exactly that. Nothing's happening."

"But isn't that good?" I asked. Surreptitiously, I slipped the nightie he likes out of my drawer, wondering if I could distract him with that line of thought, though my stomach still didn't feel quite right. I thought of it as "taking one for the team" though, as I had heard Tom refer to being tackled by a much bigger opponent in an impromptu match we had watched him in earlier that fall. Charlie was gentle and considerate, but I just wasn't really up for it.

Neither was he, as it turned out. When he turned around and saw me getting ready to slip it on, he shook his head, "Not tonight, old girl, sorry. You're not the only one who's not in tip-top form tonight. Just hand across the Pepto, will you? That salmon was a little oily for my taste."

"Why did you eat it, then?"

"Simple: because I like it, and I didn't know how oily it was. Sometimes, you can ask the silliest questions."

"If you want my opinion, it wasn't the salmon, it was all that dessert you put away. Really, Charlie, three pieces of mango pie?"

"I had the first one; I liked it. I had the second one; I liked it. I still felt hungry, and so the third one was a foregone conclusion."

"You eat too fast is the real problem, so you don't know when you're full."

"I didn't!" he exclaimed indignantly. "I was on my best behavior tonight. Besides, you must've eaten something that didn't agree with you too, to go rooting around in my bedside table for the tonic."

"I ate too fast too, okay Charlie? And I ate a bit too much, what with all the excitement. We don't go to many parties anymore."

"Well, I can't say as I miss it much. Or at least, I like our card parties, and casual parties at people's houses, but all the fooferall that people get up to when they get hitched, that's not my style." He disappeared into the bathroom and came back a minute later carrying a glass of water and some kind of tablets. He tossed two of them down and poured the whole glass of water down his throat. "The bathroom's free, if you want it now. I plan to be in there for a while. I've still got gas."

"What is that you just took? I'm not sure you should be mixing medications."

"Nonsense, done it all my life. I've got a headache too, you see."

"Poor Charlie."

"Poor Charlie, poor Charlie. I'm trying to be a gentleman and offer you first crack at the bathroom, but don't expect it to last forever." He waved his hand at the bathroom door like an impatient usher.

"I know what might help," I said.

"Well, I don't. What?"

"After you finish, we can have a shower together, and I'll soap your back. You always sit so rigidly, I'm sure it must be sore."

He shook his head once more. "Like I said, I can't do it tonight, I'm really—"

"Just a shower, Charlie, just a shower."

"Aren't you sleepy?"

"Actually, I'm a bit wired. I'll go in now and come out in a few minutes, and when you're ready, if you want, I'll try to make you feel better. Is that all right?"

He patted my arm. "Didn't mean to get grouchy. Okay, we'll try that plan. If you go to sleep before I get out, don't worry about it. There's always tomorrow night to take showers. And then I might be able to do something about it."

(Evy, Blaise)

It was starting to snow, and snow heavily, but Donald had already closed up and gone home to relieve the nanny when I got back to the agency from Angela's. I suppose I was feeling virtuous, because even though usually when I told him I was at Angela's I was actually with Blaise, this time I was telling the truth. Angela was rather a drag these days, always telling me things for my own good, most of which seemed to involve breaking up with Blaise, or not seeing him unless I could get a divorce right away, and stuff like that. She didn't seem to understand that he was my lifeline to a more exciting future, and I loved him and moreover was still caught in-between horses mid-stream, as Dad had said a few months ago. But Angela was the only person I could talk to about Blaise, because she was the only friend I really had who was that close; she was from my college days.

I let myself in and felt around in my desk until I found Blaise's key. He had asked me for it the day before, saying something about planning to change the door locks because of break-ins in the neighborhood that had been linked to some cleaning agency he used, or something like that. Really, I didn't usually keep the key there, it was usually on my key ring, but I had been unlocking my desk the day before that to get some papers out for Donald, when he suddenly pointed to my hand and asked, "What does that key go to? I've never seen that one before." I made some noncommittal answer, not sure that he really believed me, but what could he do? I had taken it off and locked it in my desk, when coincidentally the next day Blaise wanted it back, and I didn't have it with me.

So now I thought I would go over to his apartment before the storm really settled in for the night and maybe spend a quiet hour alone with him, being made much of and stroked, at the very least. I wasn't really worried about the storm, because I had the four-wheel drive and I'm a good driver, even Dad says so.

Blaise had been sort of absent-minded lately, and when I'd asked him what was wrong, he'd kept saying that he was all wrapped up in business arrangements for his uncle, but told me not to worry my pretty head about the details, or words to that effect. It's funny, when Donald used to say such things jokingly, I would get angry at him, but with Blaise, even though he seemed to mean it seriously, I didn't feel angry. I had asked myself if it was purely the effect of hearing it in a charming accent with French phrases and expressions scattered throughout that placated me, but I hoped I wasn't that foolish.

As I pulled onto Blaise's street, I noticed that oddly enough I could see his whole house lit up from where I was, except for the very front, where some large vehicle or other was blocking my view. The defroster was a little sluggish, so I used my hand to rub the windshield and turned the defroster up another notch. It was a huge furniture van! I couldn't think why on earth Blaise was having something delivered in the middle of a snowstorm, but it must be something pretty big to warrant all the fuss. As I pulled in behind the van, he ran down the steps in his fur parka and exchanged some kind of papers with the driver, who was standing there clapping his hands together in the cold. Blaise signed something, then the driver got in and drove off, after pulling back and forth a few times in the deep snow which had already accumulated in Blaise's driveway.

At first, Blaise didn't seem to see me, but I leaned on the horn, cut off the car, and jumped out, running up to meet him as well as I could. He peered into the snowy twilight

and then said finally, "Evy? Is that you, *m'amie*?" I was shivering as I drew up with him; my coat was really for appearance' sake, a red leather one lined with real fur, which didn't help much, since it was of a very thin quality. "Come inside for a moment, please, before you turn to a popsicle."

I was used to his odd locutions by now. "Icicle, you mean. But what's going on here, Blaise? What have you ordered now? Is it the new bed you said you were going to order for us? I can't wait to try it out."

He glanced down at me from the front door with an uncomfortable look on his face, as if he were in the middle of something not quite honest. Maybe he had bought whatever it was illegally; I didn't know how furniture importers worked. He didn't answer, but stood aside to let me in, and then shut the door behind me quickly, as if to block out the cold.

But it was cold inside, too. The fire was out, which was usually on when he was home, at least in cold weather, but the first thing I noticed was that there was no furniture in the living room. Nothing but a stepladder, which stood under the chandelier in the hall, and a small stool he usually kept under the kitchen counter. "Blaise?" I asked, not really sure what I wanted to know, but knowing already what I was afraid of. It was obvious. Just to make sure, I walked into the downstairs guest room, and looked around. No furniture there either, not a stick of it. "Why--?"

He came up close to me and tried to gather me into his arms, saying, "It is all the fault of my uncle, you see, Evy. He want that I should come back to France for a while to live. Ah, but *ma belle ange*, I will never forget you and the sweetness we have found together. Never will I put out of my mind your lips like rubies, and your soft, gentle eyes. And of course, your so beautiful body, that will haunt my dreams."

"And you—can't I—don't you want to take me with you?" He reached for me again, and this time I let him hold me. He covered my hands in kisses and started to move his lips over my neck, then just stopped and held me, swaying gently back and forth in the frigid air.

"Ah, but no, I cannot. For my uncle, to give me the business, he insist that...well, you know, my Evy, you have your Donald, and your baby. And my uncle say that I too should marry, it is what you call, I think, 'high noon.'"

"I think you mean 'high time,'" I said, but my mind was no longer on teaching him proper English. "But do you mean you are having to make an arranged marriage? Why don't you tell him no? Surely people no longer disinherit people over things like this."

He was holding me from behind, and I felt rather than saw him shrug. "No, he not disinherit me, but he remind me of *une vieille amie* I have, and it would please him much if I marry her. So, I must do it to please him, and keep peace *dans la famille*."

I worked free of him then, though he tried for a minute to hold onto me. For the first time in a long time really angry with him, I asked, "Oh, and just how '*vieille*' is she?"

Again, he moved his shoulders, only half-heartedly, though. "Ah, I know her a long time before I know you, Evy. But she is still of an age to have a family."

"How old?" I insisted. I didn't know why I even cared, but he remained evasive.

"Does it really matter, *ma belle*? Is it not enough that we must part? Let us part like the kind friends we have become, and wish one another the best of health and happiness. You know, I have never breathe a word to a soul about us, not even to a confessor."

"I thought you didn't go to church anymore anyway."

"Ah, that too may change, my Evy," he said sadly.

I felt then like I just couldn't go tamely back home to Donald, I just couldn't. I said, "Blaise, there's still time to change your mind. Please, don't go. Or at least, don't leave me here, take me with you. I'm sure I could make a good impression on your uncle, I'm sure I could. You'll see." I tried to wind myself back up in his arms, but now instead of drawing me close, he moved away from me a space.

He held his hands out helplessly. "*Je regret*, Evy. What do you want me to do? My flight leaves in three hours from the capitol, and I must be on it. Ah, my Evy, you don't understand, my uncle he is a stupid, he is a selfish old man!"

Abruptly, as if I were having the experience of dying, I saw my life for at least the last eight months telescope before my eyes. I lost my temper, and yanking his key out of my pocket I threw it at him, and yelled like a fishwife, "And you're a selfish young one! You slinking, slimy, sneaky, French son-of-a-bitch! How dare you make a fool of me! Come here you, and I'll give you something to feel your regrets about!" I grabbed for his hair and gave it a mighty pull, but he ducked out from under my hands and protected himself from me by running around to the other side of the room.

I was too angry to waste it in chasing him around and around, and I could tell that he wasn't going to change his mind now, so after kicking over his stool and toppling the stepladder down, I slammed out the door into the cold, glad now that I had tried so hard to keep things secret. Of course, Dad had said people were talking, but that didn't mean they really knew anything substantial; people always talk about what's none of their business. I revved up the car, which didn't seem to want to start at first, and then thought where to go to next. Out for a drink would have been comforting, but I knew better than to drink and drive, so I pulled out of the driveway with one swift turn, and luckily didn't

end up in the gutter. It was slick, and though I might've been able to get home to Donald, I didn't really even want to try. And anyway, home was on the other side of Lacy Gorge Boulevard, which was dangerous in winter blizzards during rush hour traffic. I was a little closer to my other home, my old home, where Dad still probably kept some liquor in his old cabinet. Suddenly, the thought of Dad and even Dot was very comforting, and I just thought of my old room, which they had turned into a guest room when Dot first moved in, one of the many reasons I had unfairly disliked her, I realized now. I could stay there for the night if I could get there, and phone Donald and say I'd left too late to get home. He knew where all the baby's things were and how to take care of her, we had both read the baby books. He was just going to have to deal with reality now instead of his silly, wishy-washy, sentimental views of love and life. So far, the only part of reality he understood was running a business, not handling a family crisis, and certainly not consoling an unfaithful wife. I was somehow going to have to deal with that myself, hard as it seemed. And of course, there was Dad.

(Dot, Charlie, Evy)

I heard the snowplow pass by twice before I realized that it was six-thirty and I still didn't have dinner on the table for Charlie and me. But the electricity had gone off for about an hour and a half, and had just come back on five minutes before. He went around blowing out candles and lamps, and said, "Well, I guess the worst of the storm's over now, Dot. I've reset all the clocks. Shall I give you a break tonight and rustle us up some grub?"

I thought about that. I was just getting ready to answer when I thought I heard a car in the drive, pulling right up to the front door. I went to one of the windows and parted the curtain to look out. "Who's that out in the storm at this time of night?" I asked, thinking at first that it must be one of the neighbors checking on us. We weren't really old or unhealthy enough to be checked on, but Ballard's boy had come across to clear our walk before the storm really hit full force, and he had inquired on behalf of his mother if we needed anything. Charlie insisted on giving him warm cider and brownies for his trouble, since he refused money. The Ballards were all like that, really fine neighbors. Then I recognized who it was, and got a real shock. "It's Evy, Charlie, oh my dear sweet Lord, it's Evy."

Charlie looked at me keenly, but all he said was "You don't pray often, old woman, being the heathen that you are. Don't worry about Evy, if she's here, she's at least somewhere where we know she's safe." All the same, he hurried over and jerked open the door, holding open the storm door too, while the cold wind swept around the room.

Evy fell through the door in a thin red leather thing and red leather boots, though she was so covered in snow that it was at first impossible to see the color of her coat. Shedding snow all across the living room, she came in crying and bawling, and threw herself on Charlie as he closed the door.

"I need something to drink. And I need a place to stay, Daddy. He's thrown me over!" was what she said after Charlie had shushed and patted and stood there for a few minutes as drenched as Evy was. He treated her as gently as a little ballerina, twirling her around as he helped her shrug out of her coat. It was a tight fit, and was moreover wet, which didn't help matters. He went out of the room for a minute while Evy sat on the long sofa hunched over and shivering, then he came back from the den bearing the quilt I had made the year before.

"Okay if I use this, Dot?" he asked, and draped it over Evy's shoulders without really waiting for permission. I nodded, but no one was really looking at me, so I went to the kitchen and heated up a mug of cider posthaste in the microwave. When I took it back in the living room, Charlie was on one knee examining the contents of his liquor cabinet.

"Here, Charlie, put some whiskey in this, or better yet, some brandy."

"Straight out of brandy, my love."

"Whiskey will have to do, then. And make it strong."

"Yeah, Daddy, make it strong," sobbed Evy, mascara under her eyes and even running onto one cheek. Funny, if I'd thought about it before I would've supposed that Evy would buy that expensive stuff that doesn't run, but I guessed that after all she wasn't up to all the tricks.

Charlie handed her the mug, and taking a deep and tearful sip of it, "This tastes awful," she hiccuped. Then she set the mug down and cried into Charlie's shoulder again where he sat by her on the couch.

"Shh, shh, Evy, don't take on so. Donald will come to his senses, never fear. Why, the man adores you. All you have to do is be patient, and treat him better."

"It's not Donald, Dad," she wailed. "It's Blaise." And she took another big drink from the mug and hiccuped again.

While she was busy sipping and trying to stop her hiccups, Charlie's eyes roved over to me. They were glinting at something, I didn't know what, but I thought the man was now able to see his way ahead. "Well, now Evy, I'm not the kind to say 'I told you so,' but in a way couldn't you sort of see it coming? I mean, when he didn't speak up months ago?"

Woefully, she said, "I'd hoped I was making headway, that's all. Oh, I know he said almost at the beginning that he didn't think he should take me away from Donald, but he presented it as a favor he was doing me, so that I could keep my rich husband and still have a rich lover too. And I just thought that French people were like that, had to have two of everything to keep themselves happy. I thought maybe if he lived here long enough and got used to me, that he would want to be with just one. And me with just one. But it turns out that he has somebody back there in France that his uncle wants him to marry, at least if that's the truth. And it's his choice too, it's pretty obvious."

"Don't you think you're being kind of hard on French people, Evy? I mean, I don't have your education and don't know French, but somehow, I doubt if the lady's any

happier about you than you are about her, if she even knows about you. I think your Blaise is probably just a stinker through and through, never mind where he comes from. A different Frenchman might have taken you away from Donald in short order and married you himself, if that's the way it worked out. But it didn't work out that way, my darling. It just didn't work out that way this time."

Suddenly she glanced over at me. "I guess you think I'm pretty foolish, huh Dot?" she said. There was no resentment in her tone, but I could tell that this was the moment that would make or break us, so I pretended to consider.

"Oh, I don't know, Evy. I took a chance on your father. Went on a cruise with him, moved in with him, lived with him for a while. Finally married him. All of that at my age was risky business. But I took the risk, and I'm glad I did, because your father is worth it. And you're worth it too, Evy, whether any old Blaise or Donald or any other man realizes and appreciates it. I wouldn't toss out the baby with the bath water yet, though. I mean, not the baby. Not the literal baby. I mean Donald. Who knows, something better may come of all this." Having said my piece, I went back into the kitchen to fix something to eat, since it was getting later and later and no one, I felt sure, had eaten. And Evy at least had drunk quite a good bit of alcohol, so I felt it was time for some food.

The dining room seemed kind of formal for three people, but it has the nice clock in it that ticks so soothingly and softly, and only chimes once on the hour; I decided to serve up in there. The clock is usually so quiet, in fact, that we can't even hear it from upstairs. Rather than preparing something complicated, I set out dish after dish of potluck on the table, thinking that maybe something there would tempt Evy's appetite, though I knew

she thought that the things I cook are too fancy by half. Finally, in desperation, I sliced up some carrot and celery sticks and put out a French onion dip with them that I had bought for Charlie's occasional treat of potato chips. Tough luck, old man, I thought, if Evy'll eat it, she deserves it. Driving through a storm like that, and just to come and cry on her father! Now I would never hear the end of it about how he had routed the vile seducer from his daughter's life. Always supposing that something he'd said had made an impression. I knew one thing, though. I doubted if Evy would ever get fooled again by that sort of thing, and her hard-headedness was certainly partly gotten from him. She had been stubborn, but I'll just bet, I thought, that she's stubborn both ways.

I called them into dinner, but as I stepped into the living room to see where they were Charlie shushed me, and I saw that Evy was on her cell phone. "Yes, Donald, I'm fine, I'm just over at Dad's. I was late leaving and I didn't want to risk the boulevard in a storm at this time of night. Here, you can talk to Daddy if you don't believe me."

"She's here, Donald, not to worry. We'll get her home when everything's all right," Charlie said, obviously not making any promises about what would happen tomorrow, but probably getting by with it if Donald thought that all that was wrong was the storm.

I coaxed the two of them into the dining room, Evy at first saying she wasn't hungry, and Charlie probably hungry as a hippo but not wanting to leave Evy. Once she had served her plate with this and that and Charlie had added a few things more to it, all together a fraction of what I had seen her eat when she was her old self, she sat and picked at her food. Charlie and I glanced at her apologetically, both of us starving but eating slowly so as not to drive her away. The clock chimed eight while we were still

toying with our food, and after about eight-thirty I thought that she had eaten all she was probably going to eat for the night.

"Now Evy, if you get hungry in the middle of the night, you come on down and get something else. There's plenty in there, all sorts of things, and nothing Charlie and I are saving up special." I had hesitated at first to tell her this, she looked so tired and dragged out, and I was afraid I'd surprise the old half-scornful look on her face. But she turned her face to me and smiled a bit sadly, and said, "Thanks, Dot. I will. I think I'll go up to bed now. Daddy, do you still have that old red nightshirt? I'd like to wear it, if I may."

"Heavens, Charlie, I've been worrying about everything except getting the bedroom ready. I'll hunt up his old shirt, Evy, and put it on your bed. I think there's a new toothbrush in the guest bathroom too, and soap and a small tube of toothpaste—here, just let me run up and check on all that. You sit tight for a spell while I check it out." I dashed out of the room and went upstairs, ticking things off on my fingers as I went.

Finally, the evening was over. Giving a goodnight wave weakly as she went up the stairs, Evy left us alone in the living room, where we sat mentally surveying the dénouement of the great affair. Charlie, stretching the quilt across the back of the couch to dry from Evy's snow shower, suddenly looked at me and snorted.

I jumped nearly out of my hide, and said, "What on earth's the matter with you? Some part of your dinner disagree with you?"

"When that happens, I burp or fart."

"Don't be coarse, Charlie."

"Well I do, and so do you."

"Is it really important to discuss it right now?"

"Well, but what on earth do you mean by calling me 'risky business?'"

"What?"

"Why did you tell my daughter that your thing with me was like her thing with that stupid French bastard, and was a risky business? Did you really feel like that?"

"I didn't say they were alike, Charlie, I just said love is a risky business. And it is, isn't it? Well, come on, admit it my man, it's something we nearly all try to get for ourselves, and some of us miss the boat."

"I guess I'm just lucky that I tied you down when I did, then."

"We're both lucky."

"Well, one of the unlucky ones is upstairs now, and is going to be up and roaming around here tomorrow with nothing to do with herself but pine. Can you think of anything for us to do?"

"I'll bend my mind to it, Charlie, but I'm really sleepy right now, I don't know about you. These winter nights make me sleepy early."

"Let's go to bed, then. Maybe tomorrow things will look better."

(Dot, Charlie, Evy, Donald)

The next morning dawned bright and fine and windless, as it often does after a storm. I got up early and dug out those old sheets and clothes I had washed for Goodwill, and took them down to the living room. When I got there, I saw that Charlie's winter boots were waiting on the mat. I went into the kitchen for coffee and breakfast and he was already in there, dressed and ready for the day.

"I've got some eggs in the skillet, Dot, want some?"

"Sure, sweetheart, why not? Just don't add so much cayenne to mine, if you don't mind."

"Too late. Not that I've added that much, my stomach is delicate this morning too. Besides, remember that article we read in *Prevention*, about how hot spices are good for you?"

"Alright, but I want a slice of toast with mine."

"I've already got it ready," he said, slipping a prepared plate in front of me. "And have you thought of something for my daughter to do today to keep her busy?"

"I think so. I've got those bags of Goodwill clothes in there that I'm going to try to persuade her into folding with me. She's seemed a bit more biddable around me lately, so maybe she won't mind."

"I hope not. I mean, I think so." He ate a few bites, then waved his fork and clarified. "I think she's started to appreciate your good qualities, Dot."

"Just remember not to force too much conversation on her about all this, Charlie. Probably she's not up to talking about it much yet."

He slathered a slice of toast with jam, bit into it, and said after chewing a bite or two, "The fact of the matter is, Dot, you and she are on your own for a while this morning. When I went down to the end of the drive to get the paper earlier, we were almost totally covered up. And I met Steve Ballard out there, too. He and I are going to go and shovel out old Mrs. Farnsworth's and the Billings's after we finish our own."

"Oh, dear. I hope Evy can tolerate me for that long. Well, maybe you shouldn't be eating so much if you're going to go out and get vigorous exercise."

"Nonsense." Then catching my eye, he said, "All right, I'll start out slow and easy."

"And be sure and wrap up warmly, it's cold out there. I don't want to look out and see you pulling those gloves off. I bought them for you for a reason."

"Never fear, old girl, you just better be worrying about how you're going to handle Evy when she comes down." And that was supposed to put me in my place. He finished his breakfast quickly and put his dishes in the sink for someone else to rinse off, heading out toward the front door after saluting me once boisterously on the cheek. "I'm off," he said.

When Evy did join me in the kitchen about half an hour later, I had just started the dishwasher up with all the dishes from breakfast and the night before and was getting ready to sit and rest with a second cup of coffee. "Hi," she softly greeted me, her eyes swollen and puffy from sleep and also probably from crying. But she wore only a touch of makeup this morning, and had her hair pinned back with two clips. She was still a really pretty woman; funny how much a kinder expression could affect the shape of a face.

"Good morning, Evy. Your dad's gone out to shovel out, I'm afraid, so you're stuck with me for a while."

"Oh, that's all right."

"Do you want some breakfast? Some juice? Something?"

She appeared to think about it, but then cautiously said, "I suppose so. Maybe I could just have some cinnamon toast and some coffee. Do you still keep Dad's cinnamon toast around here?"

"We do indeed." I started to get up and wait on her, but she waved me back down.

"No, Dot, just let me monopolize your kitchen a minute if you don't mind. I'll feel easier if I have something to do for myself." She started for the cupboards, then turned and said, "Is that okay?"

"Of course it is! You used to live here yourself, after all. You probably know where he keeps all the bread."

"Dear Dad! The same old cabinet! It's nice to know that some things don't change."

I waited silently while she drank her coffee and ate her two slices of toast. It was good that she was even that hungry; at least she probably wasn't going to nearly pine away now, like Donald. Her father had always said she was a sensible creature; but then, he had thought Donald was too. It went to show where the real strength in the relationship was, if we'd ever had any doubts on that score.

She poured herself a second cup of coffee, put cream and sugar in it, then came back to the table and gave me a direct glance. Then she looked down at her hands again. Her lower lip quivered a minute, and I thought, oh no, here it comes. But all she said was, "He wasn't even going to tell me."

"Blaise?"

She nodded.

"Tell you what, Evy?"

"That he was leaving. He was getting ready to go when I got there. That's what hurts most of all, I guess."

"Maybe he was going to drop you a letter. Not that that's a responsible way to do it, but—" I broke off, because now her lips were quivering with laughter.

"I don't think so," she said. "He still has the occasional trouble with speaking English. He might be able to lie on paper in one language, but lying in two—" she giggled a minute. Then her face got serious again. "What a bullshit artist."

"Strong words," I said, smiling at her and patting her upturned hand.

"Well," she shrugged, "That's the way it is." She blinked back what I think was a tear, then squared her jaw. It was a funny impression: she was exactly a combination of the new Evy and the old Evy all of a sudden, beautiful but determined. I wondered then if Donald was up for the challenge, and decided it was best to leave him out of the picture for the time being.

When I could tell that she was starting to fidget a little, I said, "Evy, you don't have to if you don't want to, but if you're looking for something to do this morning, I could use some help in the living room folding up clothes for the Goodwill."

Her face cleared and she looked relieved to have a part of the day planned out for her so neatly. She probably wasn't any eagerer to work round to Donald than I was, I thought. "I don't mind at all Dot, it'll keep my mind off of things."

I gave each of us two big bags of clothes and set several cardboard boxes around in the floor. Charlie always hated this part of things, because he said that they would even take clothes in bags, and he didn't see the point of folding them neatly. I did, however, and Evy made no protest of any kind as we started on our jobs.

As became clear while we worked, however, she wasn't satisfied with something. She kept glancing at my face, and I kept smiling at her and encouraging her, commenting on some of the clothes, especially ones of Charlie's which I thought she might recognize. After about half an hour, she said some things that made it obvious that she wasn't free of the topic of Donald, not by a long shot.

"Dot?" She started out, then stopped.

"Yes?" I kept on folding, waiting for whatever was coming next.

"Does Dad—well I mean, are you and Dad—in the—the bedroom. Are you happy?"

I felt my cheeks redden, but said without looking at her, "Yes, Evy, we are. Very happy."

"Excuse me for asking."

"Well, I guess you need to ask somebody, and you can't really ask your father that type of question." Again, I waited.

"I'm not happy. Not with Donald, I mean."

"Oh? And is Donald happy, do you think?"

"Donald is like a sack of potatoes rolling around. At least, we haven't been—well, together for a good long while now. He doesn't touch me right."

I didn't know what to say to that, but I could certainly sympathize, having been with men before Charlie who were selfish in bed. I didn't know if that's what she meant, but it

didn't really matter, she wasn't happy. All of a sudden, I bethought myself of something, and said, "I don't know, Evy, but I may have at least a partial answer. Hold on a minute, I'll be back." Then I stopped and asked her, "Is Donald a reading man? Did he really read those baby books the two of you bought?"

"Yes, the both of us did. Why?"

I went into the den where we had the big bookshelves and after a few minutes' searching, found what I was looking for. I grabbed up my old blue zip-up book bag so that Charlie couldn't see what I was trying to do when he came back, at least not in time to interfere. When I went back into the living room, she had finished one bag of clothes entirely, and was starting on the second.

"Here, Evy, when things settle down a bit, if they do, why don't you try passing along some of this reading material to Donald?"

She took the books out of the bag and looked at the backstraps curiously. "*Kama Sutra*—oh, I've heard of that. *Responses of the Sexes*, *The Hite Report*, *Love and the Orgasm*. I don't know." A ghost of a smile crossed her face, and she looked up at me. "Isn't that sort of like telling him he doesn't know what he's doing?"

"You're the one who said he was like a sack of potatoes."

"Well, he's thinner now, but—I think even Donald, as wishy-washy as he is sometimes, would get angry if I came back from an affair and demanded that he start reading sex books. Though one or two of these were on the list the minister assigned to us before we were married."

"And did you read them?"

"I didn't, and I don't think Donald did either." She sighed. "Things were different then."

"Yes, when you're first in love, troubles seem less serious, and you feel more generous."

She wrinkled her forehead. "I don't know if I want to go back together with Donald. He's such a fuddy-duddy sometimes, to use one of Dad's old words. Anyway, having to read books about it seems so artificial." She paused for a minute. "Blaise just seemed to know how to touch me by instinct."

I said softly, "There's such a thing as having had too much practice, Evy. At least when it comes to heartless manipulation." I thought that sounded a little like Charlie's Puritan streak, but maybe a bit of it wouldn't come amiss.

She sniffed, and wiped her nose with an expensive-looking hankie that didn't have much to it. "There's Kleenex over there in the box if you really need to blow. It would be a shame to spoil that nice linen."

"Thanks, Dot," she said, grabbing at the paper. She blew her nose hard and wiped vigorously, the way her father sometimes did, only in a feminine key.

"You're welcome, my dear. You can just bring the box over here if you want. Never know when you might need more."

"No, I mean thank you for everything. You've been so good to me, and I don't deserve it. Sometimes I've been so ornery and hard to get along with." She almost wailed this last, but I suspected that it was merely reaction to all the things that had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours, so I hugged her and sat by her on the couch, patting and

rubbing her back and trying to encourage her to look on whatever bright side might still be there.

After what I thought was a decent interval to allow her to get some of it out of her system, I said, "If you're going to borrow the books, you zip them up in the bag now, so that Charlie doesn't see them when he gets back. You know how nosy he is sometimes."

"Yes, and he would probably be embarrassed too."

"Well," I answered lightly, "all we did was have breakfast and fold clothes, and chat a bit, that's all Charlie needs to know for right now. He's a smart fellow anyway, and can figure things out for himself in time without me spilling the beans."

But Charlie was a lot quicker than even I realized to get a hold of the truth. He came in, stomping and scattering snow far beyond the mat a little while after Evy and I had already had our grilled cheese with tomatoes and hot drinks. Evy was already in his other winter jacket and a pair of old running pants of mine, pinned up around her waist. She hugged him swiftly, and said, "Daddy, I'm going to walk down to Sumner's Market and pick up some magazines, okay? It's only two blocks away, and it looks like the street is mostly clear by now."

"Okay, Evy, but be careful. It's slippery out there still."

I watched her out the window. First, she put the bookbag in the passenger side of her car, at the same time getting out the fancy leather purse which she had locked out in the car overnight. Then, making her way carefully down the driveway, she slowly disappeared around the corner.

"Well, how did it go, old girl?" Charlie gave me a hug too, and made his way to the kitchen. "Eaten without me, I see. Probably for the best. Did she eat well?"

"She ate a grilled cheese and had a hot toddy. I did find that small bottle of brandy in the back of the cabinet; you didn't look carefully last night."

"Well, but maybe not too much alcohol for her, okay? We don't want that sort of problem to develop, too."

"Oh, I don't think it will. One swallow doesn't make a spring, to make a bad pun."

"A what?" he said, not really attending, his head in the refrigerator while he pulled out things to eat.

"Skip it. How was the shoveling?"

"Okay, I guess. Many hands make light work," he said, sitting at the table and gnawing on a chicken leg. "So, what else did you girls get up to while I was gone?"

"Oh, this and that. Ate breakfast and folded clothes, mostly."

"And lunch too? You're really the woman for getting people to eat." He paused.

"And what was in the bag she took out to the car with her?"

"The bag?" I asked vaguely, taking my dishes to the sink and rinsing them.

"Yes, the bag. Your old blue book bag. Don't pretend you don't know what I mean. What did you do, slip her out my old nightshirt to take home? I bet Donald'll love that." He looked up at me, but when I still didn't answer he stared at me and demanded, "Look here, did she say anything? Anything, I mean, about how she feels or what she's going to do?"

"Not much."

"C'mon, Dot, surely the two of you didn't sit here like a couple of blamed mutes, just folding clothes away. She's my daughter, don't I have a right to know? Besides, I always tell you what I talk about with people."

"Well, let's just say we had a heart-to-heart about woman things." Hoping I could scare him away with "woman things," in the way some men were intimidated by such topics, I poured him a toddy too from the hot pan on the stove, and set it in front of him.

He waited a minute, then bravely questioned, "Woman things? What woman things? Since when did you and my daughter discuss woman things?" He waved my hand away from the cup and said, "I've got a hard head, old woman, and you can't get me tipsy that easy. I want to know something, at least, of what went on here while I was gone, and you can try to get out of it with 'woman things' until you're blue in the face, but I watched Evy grow up, and—" then a light dawned. He looked up at me through his bushy eyebrows and got it on the first shot. "Was it about sex?"

I said, "Sort of."

"Oh. And what was the book bag for?"

Sighing in exasperation and not really caring whether he liked the sound or not, I said, "What are book bags usually for, Charlie? I loaned her some books."

"Oh," he said again, then gasped as he burned his lip on the toddy, which he had taken too large a sip of. "I should've known. You and the books, you and the books. It's always books with you. Well though, I don't know any fancy remedy for what ails her. A book may be as good as anything else, I guess." He waited a minute. "And how did she seem? She looked like she might have cried a spell."

"Oh, Charlie, if it doesn't break her, it's going to make her, at least make her a kinder person, I think. She was really sweet to me. We got along just fine."

"Well that, at least, is good to hear. I don't know about you, but I could use a spot of tranquility after all the howdy-do."

"You know, Charlie, after you finish you'd better go up and soak in the tub or get a hot shower or something. It's been a while since you've done that much shoveling, and you're going to be sore, mark my words." I removed the food plates from the table before he could eat more than was good for him, and rinsed off his dishes too.

While we were sitting just enjoying the peace and quiet, the phone rang. I glanced at my watch: it was two-thirty in the afternoon. "Bet it's Donald," I said. "Do you want to get it, or shall I?"

"Who's the better liar?"

I went for the phone, saying, "We don't have to lie. Just don't tell all of the truth."

"Yeah, you're good at that," he responded, following me into the living room.

"Shh, Charlie. Hello?" I waited for what seemed like a long time before a voice came down the crackly wire. Evidently there were still power line difficulties somewhere.

"Hi, this is Donald." I nodded at Charlie in confirmation. "Is Evy coming home now, or what?" He sounded a little desperate, but not like he really knew what had been going on in his wife's life.

"Well, she had a good night's sleep, Donald. She helped me with some chores I had to do, and we had to wait for the walks and streets to be shoveled. Charlie's just now come back in from it. And we had lunch. But she's stepped out to the corner store to buy some magazines. Shall I have her call you when she gets back?"

Silence. Then, "Yes, if she doesn't mind. I've had the baby since early last night, and I haven't slept much because the storm knocked out all the electricity here and the wind howled all night. It was quite a spectacle."

I hated to sound unfeeling, but I could understand why Charlie sometimes got annoyed with him. "Well, it is your baby, Donald," I said in a reasonable tone.

"Yes, but I'm supposed to be at work, and the nanny can't get here. For that matter, I'm going to have a hard time getting out. I had to shovel out, too."

"Don't be ridiculous, Donald, nobody expects the agency to be open after a big storm like this. Who knows, the electricity may still be out downtown. They've had trouble with that power grid before."

"I guess so," he sounded unconvinced. "Please do have her call me when she gets back, Dot, okay?"

"Sure thing, Donald," I said cheerfully. "Bye." I hung up without waiting for a response and said to Charlie, "See? Easy as pie."

"Yeah, why weren't you that glib in the fall when we were raking leaves with the pair of them? That was one hell of a ticklish spot, and you just disappeared into the kitchen for what seemed like twenty minutes." But he patted me on the shoulder.

"If you remember correctly, I had to keep Donald occupied while you went on your little stroll. And you're a bit tricky yourself, mister, as I recall."

He rubbed his bald spot and said, "Well, don't let's fuss about it. What are we going to tell Evy when she comes back? Do you think she's up to going home yet?"

"Oh, I imagine so. She's not falling apart at the seams the way she was last night, anyway. And it's on her shoulders now. She's got to face Donald with whatever she chooses to tell him, if anything."

"He's a damned ignoramus if he doesn't know something has been going on."

"Well, let's back off and let them settle their own problems. We've done what we're supposed to, that's for sure. Oh, here she comes up the walk." We both peeked out the curtain.

"She doesn't look upset," Charlie observed. "It must've done her good to get out."

When Evy came in, she was empty-handed, having put the bag of magazines in the car on her way past. She stepped in for a minute, hugged Charlie and then me, then pulled her coat out of the front closet where Charlie had hung it.

"It's probably not dried out yet," he pointed out. "Not a very practical coat, Evy, I must say." Then he told her, "Donald called. Wants you to call."

"It's okay, Dad, it doesn't matter. I'm just going to go home. I've got to go and change first, though. Dot, can I put my dress through a dryer cycle in case it's still damp, too?"

"Well, you could, but it looked like the kind of material that might ruin that way."

Evy sighed, then smiled in the oddest way. "That doesn't matter either, really. I'm tired of it anyway. Bad memories."

"Sure then, Evy, go ahead. I can lend you a scarf and hat. You really shouldn't have been out without one before, I'm sorry I didn't think of it sooner."

She disappeared upstairs, then came back down carrying her clothes and went into the laundry room. Soon, she came back in dressed in her own things. After thanking us again and again, she went on out with her car keys and bag, wrapped in my old wool scarf and hat, her dress and coat and boots, and an extra pair of gloves she'd found in one of the drawers upstairs. Oddly assorted as she looked, she seemed more at peace now, and whatever she planned to do to face the music, she didn't seem to want to share it, or

at least not then. When she was gone, I turned to Charlie and pondered. "Well, I guess we're over the hump, or at least one of them."

His eyebrows contracted, and he said "Yeah, but many a camel has two humps. There's always Donald to be considered. He may be what Jeffrey would call a wuss, but the worm may turn, especially if Evy tells him the truth."

"I wouldn't see much use in staying with him if I didn't plan to tell him the truth."

"Come what may, huh?"

"Come what may."

(Dot, Charlie, Alice)

It was the second week in March, and truly unseasonable for the time of year. Birds were out, the jonquils had already bloomed, and the sky was as blue and sunny as on an early summer's day. On some of the trees, there were already buds, though as far as I could see, only the redbush showed any signs of bursting into color. Tom's and Julia Beth's wedding was only a week away, and I had to confess that I was stumped. I was sitting out on the deck with my coffee and notebook, trying to write a poem for them. At first, I had planned to write an epithalamion, but when I re-read Spenser's great and complicated success in that line, I despaired of doing so, and decided just to write a simple love poem, minus the wedding references. I was still distracted by the fine weather rather than inspired by it though, and distracted too by baby Alice, who was jumping up and down on bowed legs in her circular walker and waving a toy in the air.

We all agreed she was a brilliant baby. She had already gone through some of the preliminaries of walking such as what she was doing now, and vocalized quite freely. She often yelled "Dee-Daw" at me or "Dunt" at Charlie, her version of "Grandma" and "Gramps," which we had been trying to get her to say. Just now, she was with us for two weeks, while Evy and Donald were away. They were due back soon, in time for the wedding. Evy had managed to get her way again, persuading a reluctant Donald to close up shop and take one of his own holidays in Barbados. Evy called sometimes from home during the day to talk to me now, or more often to Charlie, not revealing much about what we really wanted to know, but clearly making some kind of effort behind the scenes. She went into work more often, but sometimes took Alice with her and watched

her there. They had a new nanny now, and Charlie and I still kept Alice two or three days a week to help them cut costs, which Donald had lately figured they needed to do. All in all, it looked like it might someday work out about fifty-fifty as far as cooperation went, though I knew it must be difficult to muster up enthusiasm for the hard work their marriage probably needed.

While I was sitting there with my pen still in hand, Charlie came around the side of the house with a pair of clippers. "Guess what, my dear? You'll never believe it." He had some twigs in his hand, switching them against his leg as he walked. Though I had objected due to the time of year, he had insisted on dragging out an old pair of shorts and a tee-shirt to work in, and now I was glad he had, because he had a good deal of sweat beading up on his forehead already.

"What is it, Dunt?" I asked, glancing down at the baby. She saw Charlie and waved her fists with enthusiasm.

"Dunt, is it? Well, Dunt came to tell you that—guess what—the forsythia is getting ready to bloom." He held up the long twigs he had been slapping on his leg, and sure enough, some yellow was popping through the husks.

"It's all this warm spring weather. Usually, they don't bloom until some time in April. Oh dear, I suppose it's global warming again."

"Well, it's an ill wind as blows nobody good, I say. Right, Alice?" He reached down and tickled the baby and she laughed and giggled at him.

"I know all about the things you say. You shouldn't be so cavalier about the environment, Charlie."

"If that means fat-headed, I'm not, am I, Alice? After all, I recycle and compost as much as the next person."

"Dunt—der!" Alice shouted.

"Maybe she's trying to say 'dunderhead,'" I suggested, then shrank away giggling like Alice as Charlie ducked and blew a raspberry on my neck.

"Just you settle down, Dee-Daw, if you know what's good for you. Want some iced tea? What are you doing there, anyway?"

"No thank you on the iced tea; I've got my coffee, and I'm writing a poem for the wedding."

"Are you going to read it in front of people?"

"No, I doubt it; I thought I would just give it to Tom and Julia Beth. You know, as a present."

"Funny sort of present." He stood looking at me a minute. I glared back. Then he said, "Oh well, it's the sort of thing Tom would like, and Julia Beth probably too, she's into that theatre stuff, after all. Go ahead, knock yourself out."

"Thank you, Charlie, I will. I'm so glad I have your permission."

"It wasn't permission, it was approval. There's a difference."

I swatted at his leg with the notebook. "Go get your tea and get busy again. We need to have the yard looking nice just in case the weather is fine and we can put tables outside next week."

He stood just inside the door, with his hand around the edge of it, and said, "I still don't see where you think you're going to put up those tables in the house if it's not fine weather. And if we put them up outside, what about bugs?"

"You've noticed everything else going on in the yard, Charlie, you should've noticed that the bugs haven't gotten onto us yet. They're still not out. And if we have to have the reception in the house, we'll move the furniture. Have faith."

"If you say so," he responded, and shut the door. A minute later, he was outside again, sitting down at one of the other chairs at the table.

"Now, how am I supposed to do this with you sitting here, you old codger?"

"Just until I finish my tea. Besides, I built this deck, I have a right to sit on it."

"Well, keep quiet, I'm trying to concentrate."

He took a few sips, said "Ahh!" then to the baby, "Who do you like best, Alice, Dee-Daw or Dunt?"

"Dee-Daw-Dunt!" she suggested, creatively.

I laughed, and said, "She appears to like us best together. Oh, what's the use, I'm never going to get this right." I put down my pen and paper in frustration and took a deep drink of my coffee, but it was lukewarm and not particularly appealing.

"Do you need a rhyming word, or what? I'm good with rhyming words, used to make up limericks all the time."

"I'm not writing that type of poem, Charlie," I grinned in spite of myself at the thought of the kind of limerick Charlie was likely to have penned in his youth.

"Oh, one of the kinds with no rhymes," he nodded sagely but vaguely. Something about that caught my attention.

"What did you say, Charlie?"

"What did I say about what?"

"Rhymes. I never thought of doing one that rhymed. Still, that's harder, but maybe..." I struggled to find an appropriate first line; that's what usually gets me started, that or a title.

"Well, I can see the women are busy."

I didn't answer right away.

"Do you want me to feed her, or what?"

I glanced at my watch. "It's not time yet, Charlie. Give it another hour or so. She'll let me know when she's hungry. But you can feed her if you want." I drew a flower on my paper, and went back to the idea of a rhyming poem.

Charlie sighed heavily once; sighed again. "Okay then," he said draining his tea. "I'm off. Will the lawn mower bother you?"

"Not as much as constant conversation." I looked up. "Sorry, but just then I had a thought, and now I think it's gone."

"Try again. I'll see you later, around lunch time." He waited for a minute and then got up and went off whistling, obviously intending to mow the grass.

Poem for a Young Couple

The trees are out, the branches bend, the bushes are in bloom,
And all along the backyard path, the daffodils find room.
And you and I, and we and they, will all go up together
To where sweet love will soon be joined in fine or stormy weather.

For if it rain, or if it blow, or if the hot sun shine
The two of you must make your way as someone helps make mine.
And I can see, and I can say, that things may come your way
Which may in time cause you to be less happy than today.

But for today, the day will stand, and lead you ever nearer
To that long span of time well spent which makes each other dearer.
For love is not a thing that grows only from sun and rain,
But also from the weathered storm, and sometimes even pain.

So sing the birds, so write the bards, so all do find it true,
That in your love you have a thing remarkable and new.
And yet, you see, renewed it is from all that went before,
And you may find beginnings still at your own children's door.

So sing we, generations, say we now to you and yours
You have only the passing days to love away the hours.
Rejoice! Make merry! Find your path amid the wholesome bowers,
And may you spend your years as one together in the flowers.

I wasn't entirely satisfied with it, but more or less decided it was the best I could do, and thought further tinkering was likely to mess it up worse. It seemed overly sentimental and contrived in places, with a few forced rhymes and old trite ideas. But then, marriage had been going on forever. What was I supposed to do about it? I closed my notebook, and played with Alice a while, concentrating on enjoying the warm day and the sunshine.

When Charlie finished mowing the grass, he raked it up by hand and put it in compost bags. Luckily, our back yard wasn't as big as our front, and he had already done that yesterday, though the weather had been windy and chilly then. That was Charlie, always pushing the season. It was time to feed the baby, and feeling like I had at least accomplished something that morning, I decided to go ahead and do it. Charlie looked up from carrying the bags around to the front though, and demanded, "What do you girls mean, eating without me? Wait for me!" He went on to the front and then came trotting back around and up the stairs while I was hastily putting out some food for him and me, even though Alice wasn't quite finished with her carrots and spinach.

She swung a plastic toy spoon in one fist and opened her mouth again like a little bird, and I continued to fill it until she lost interest. Then I wiped her chin off and washed her

face. Meanwhile, Charlie was saying to her, "Carrots and spinach—ugh! Macaroni and cheese casserole—yum!" as he made funny faces at her and ate some of his food himself.

"If you can wait for me too a minute, Charlie, I'm going to change her and put her down for her nap. She looks really tired. She's been out here all morning. Well, I mean, she had her sun hat on, but I couldn't find those baby sunglasses anywhere."

"She never wears them anyway, she throws them at me. She's turned away from the sun, stop worrying. And I'll change her and put her down, fair's fair."

"You're still eating, don't trouble yourself."

"Nonsense, I'll be back in a flash. She goes to sleep easier for me than for you anyway."

"That's true," I admitted, and relinquished Alice. While he was gone, I prepared myself a plate and got myself some of the iced tea he had been so eager to serve me earlier. It was clearly Charlie's vintage: it was way too sweet. Oh well, I often didn't have dessert, maybe this once it wouldn't matter.

When he came back, he sat down and served himself some French cut green beans and some more macaroni and cheese, with a slice of garlic bread, of all things. "Two carbohydrates at a meal, Charlie; that's a no-no, remember?"

"Just never you mind about that. How's that poem coming, by the way? Or did you give up?"

"Well, I'm not crazy about it, but I did finish."

"What, in that little amount of time? How long is it?"

"Five stanzas. Twenty lines. And it does rhyme, for what it's worth."

"That's great!" He beamed at me proudly. "Let me see it."

"Speed is not necessarily a recommendation for poetry, my love. And I'll only promise to let you see it if you don't laugh. I had meant to write only a love poem, but it turned into an epithalamion anyway."

He looked up enquiringly. "Is that something I'm supposed to know? That word?"

"I told you the other day that I was thinking of writing one."

"You might as well have said you were thinking of writing a grocery list—what does it mean?"

"A wedding poem."

Reassured, he said, "Oh, that's fine, then. They're getting married, after all." He chewed a few more bites and said, "Well, do I get to see it or not?"

I drew a deep breath, opened the notebook, and passed it over his way. He drew his glasses out of his pocket where I had told him a thousand times not to carry them when he did yard work; he had broken one pair since I knew him and God knows how many more before that. And they were always grimy from his pocket. He blew on them, rubbed them on his tee-shirt, and slid them up onto his nose, where they always slid halfway down again. He cleared his throat. For a minute I was afraid he was going to read out loud, and I cringed at the thought of hearing my own possibly foolish words coming back at me, but he read slowly and silently.

"Is a 'bard' a poet?" he stopped to ask.

"Yes. It's an old word."

"I thought so. I've heard that one before." He kept on reading. Finally, he looked up and asked, "You wrote this?"

"Yes."

"By yourself."

"Yes, Charlie."

"Just now, while I was mowing."

I nodded.

He said, "Well, that's fine, Bella, that's a fine poem. Why would I laugh?"

Against my better judgement, I giggled and said, "Well, the images are sort of conventional, but I thought you might get the idea that I meant Tom and Julia Beth to go tromping and rolling around in the middle of your flowers and bushes, or something."

He did grin then. "I see what you mean. But no, that thought never occurred to me. Now that you've said it, I won't be able to get it out of my head, I don't think." He looked over it again, then asked more intently, "And what about the 'someone who helps make mine,'—my 'way,' I guess. Who's that?"

I pinched his arm where it lay on the table. "That's you, you dolt."

"Yep, right again. See, I'm not so stupid, I understand this poem all right. And the place where we're all "going up together," that's the church, right?"

"You got it," I said, feeling proud of both of us, regardless of whether the poem was actually good or bad.

He looked at me consideringly for a minute. "Tell you what, my dear, if you put it on a piece of that parchment paper with Tom's old calligraphy set, I'll frame it for you. I've still got some pieces of wood just right for that, and we can buy the glass."

"Oh no, Charlie, that would be pretentious. Besides, I don't know anything about calligraphy."

"Just practice a little bit with the pen, and then write it plain and small. I'll show you, it's not hard. You just have to keep it from dripping. C'mon, we have plenty of time before next week, and then you can give them a framed poem they can hang up."

"No, they might not want to hang it up. They might not like it."

"Tom eats that stuff up. Why, he writes poetry himself, he said so. C'mon, don't be a noodle."

I thought about it a minute, then said, "Okay, Charlie, I'll try, but you're going to have to help me with it."

He patted my hand. "That's what I'm here for, according to your poem." He cocked his head and listened for a minute. There was only silence from the house. "Right now, the baby's asleep, and there's not a soul to disturb us. Let's carry the dishes in and put the leftovers in the fridge."

"Why are you whispering?"

"Can't you figure it out?" he asked, as he placed the last casserole dish in the refrigerator.

"Okay, now what?" I asked him, finding myself whispering with suspense as well.

"Well, since we only have those 'passing days,' and we probably have fewer of them than my son and his fiancée, we're going to go up and 'love away' a few of those hours. C'mon, Dot. Last one up the stairs has to put the dishes up tonight," but he took my hand and he led me up, and at the doorway to our bedroom, he said, "Do you want me to carry you across the way I did the first night?"

"No, Charlie, on the whole I like you with your back in good shape."

"Okay, then," he said. We went on in, and quietly he pushed the bedroom door to.