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*Next Day*

SOME MORNINGS, ZAY WAKES UP to the unblinking sunlight of a California morning, uncertain where she is. The bedclothes, the dust on the dresser, the nightstand with the clock radio, the lamp, the box of tissues too precisely held up for view are made strange by virtue of their clarity. Twenty-five, no, nearly thirty years have passed—*is it possible?*—yet her vision is still measured by the window of that one apartment in Portland and the narrow sidewalk-level window of their underground apartment: rain-streaked, blurred by water and footsteps, as soft-focused as memory. So much time, so little time. How can she be the same person?

How can she not?

Her husband, an oral surgeon who leaves early for his daily regimen of root canals, extractions, and jaw realignments, is gone. He, who has not gained a pound in thirty years, backs his BMW out of their garage promptly each morning at six. Their daughters live in other states with their jobs and their lovers, and their son, who leaves for college in a month, has chosen to sleep until the time of his departure. She faces her dislocation alone. Usually this sense of foreignness lasts a moment only, the time it takes for her to turn on the radio and hear some announcer gabbling the news, but this morning instead of the constancy of their unchanging weather or the slide in tech stocks, there are too many voices, events that she cannot comprehend, and when, after selecting another station, she hears “Dôme épais,” the duet from *Lakmé*, her equilibrium is sent reeling: the mattress tips, and the world seems to have turned upside down. But it is not until after she has run the laundry and vacuumed the living room and finds herself standing in front of her son’s room, her knuckles to the painted wood of his door, the only waking human creature in a house with six bedrooms, that the mooring of clock and calendar threatens to come undone.

It was another time, another state, another door, another life.

"Mrs. Perls," Zay called from the hallway, "is everything all right?" She knocked on the older woman's door, softly at first, then more loudly, until she was using the side of her hand rather than the knuckles. As though she were the police, she thought, the goon squad. The pigs, as Richard would call them, in that pugnacious way he had of trying so hard to be up-to-date, a short man, a young man older than his age whose impulses are fiery but five years too late. A quality as endearing as it was embarrassing.

She tried again: "Mrs. Perls, can you hear me?"

No response. Except from down the hall, where she felt—rather than heard—a door open quietly, then just as quietly close again. Mrs. Dolby no doubt, the hallway gossip, blabbermouth, and scold. Who could silence any conversation by her mere presence. Once she got going, it was impossible to escape. Zay turned back to the door. "Was it you I heard, Mrs. Perls?" She turned the knob; the door was unlocked and opened easily, too easily, and Zay took one uneasy step inside, shivering, pulling her caftan more tightly around herself as a gust of damp, freezing air spilled into the hallway. "Mrs. Perls? It's me, Zay, your neighbor. You know, number one-oh-six."

For the past three months, she and Richard had lived across the hallway from Mrs. Perls. As manager of the building, she lived in the largest apartment—two full rooms plus a bathroom, with a window overlooking the traffic on Front Avenue. Other than when she made her infrequent forays down the hall, Mrs. Perls kept to herself. Each week when Zay paid their rent, the older woman, opening the door only as wide as the safety chain allowed, took the check with fingers that bore more resemblance to the talons of some sort of exotic bird; Zay would catch a glimpse of long, lacquered nails, hear the sandpaper of the old woman's harsh voice, and then the whiff of a body long unbathed, that odor competing with a gust of some pungent, expensive lotion—Youth Dew, she thought, too strong even for Chanel—before the door was shut in her face, punctuated by the sound of at least three, maybe four, locks latching, bolting, hooking shut again.

Although she had occasionally thought that they might have some things in common, she had never harbored the illusion that she and Mrs. Perls would become great friends. They would, for instance, never drop in on each other for a cup of coffee and a few minutes of gossip. Nothing like her mother and her mother's canasta cronies. The women who traded romance novels with each other, their true currency. Zay had

never supposed that she and Richard would have stayed here this long in the first place either, and nothing could have prepared her for her first full look at the interior of Mrs. Perls's apartment. One entire wall of the living room was dominated by a rack of glass shelves that were lined with Styrofoam heads adorned by wigs in various styles and shades of red. The other wall was covered by signed and framed celebrity photographs. Bob Hope. Fred Astaire. The center of the wall was dominated by six different photographs of Frank Sinatra. A kind of shrine. Unreal. Icons of her parents' generation, each with his arm around a smiling, more youthful, black-and-white incarnation of Mrs. Perls. Something of a compensation. That a woman like Mrs. Perls could have had her moment once upon a time, no matter what she looked like now.

Various stories circulated about the manager, and Mrs. Dolby was happy to share them: Mrs. Perls had been a Vegas showgirl in the '40s. She'd been a gun moll in the Chicago mafia. She had run a speakeasy. A brothel. She had entertained President Kennedy. What difference did it make? She was living in the Hill Villa now, along with the rest of the pensioners and ne'er-do-wells.

A record was turning on the box phonograph, the needle scraping against the label. Old Blue Eyes singing Christmas tunes. In February. Jesus. Enough is enough. Zay lifted the arm and set it on the cradle.

"Mrs. Perls?" she called again. "I'm not trying to pry, but I was in the hallway, and I thought I heard a noise."

Signs of recent habitation were spread like a trail of bread crumbs. A dirty bowl and spoon stood on the drain board while the faucet dripped into an unwashed saucepan. The smell of oatmeal.

"Mrs. Perls?"

She pushed past the batik curtain that hung in the doorway between the living room and bedroom. The window was wide open, and sleet drummed the bureau beneath it, upon which several porcelain figurines had been posed. A ballerina on point. A hunter and his retriever. A girl staring into a mirror. Precious German kitsch. All coated with a layer of ice. Down on Front Avenue, a bus roared past, negotiating the long curve. Steam drifted in its wake. Which was when Zay turned from the window and saw Mrs. Perls, asleep, it seemed, in her bed, except that she was lying on top of the blankets, her housecoat untied, her pillow across her face.

"Oh," Zay said. "Oh, Jesus."

The old woman had flung one arm across her end table, and a ceramic lamp had smashed into pieces on the floor. There was her noise. And next to the white puffy hand, four pill bottles, the lids off and

emptied. Codeine, Demoral, morphine tablets, Percodan. *Jesus, Jesus.* A smorgasbord of painkillers, a buffet of death. Zay touched the cold hand for a pulse and, after flipping the sides of Mrs. Perl's housecoat across her belly to hide the sagging skin and the patch of gray pubic hair, pulled the pillow away from her face. *The mask of her final moments.* She had not gone easily.

Zay was still holding the pillow when Mrs. Dolby came to the door, a look of silent surprise on her face. A repressed scream.

"She's dead," Zay said. "I took my shower, and I heard a noise, and when I opened the door, there she was."

Mrs. Dolby began to back away. She made a sound in the back of her throat as though she were choking.

"Oh, no, no," Zay said, remembering the pillow still clutched in her hand. "It wasn't like that," she said, her free hand pointing to the nightstand as evidence. "It wasn't like that at all. She overdosed. I guess the pillow was . . . I don't know. To keep it dark?"

The older woman stopped her retreat, her curiosity gaining the upper hand, and together they looked at the building manager's body in its last position on the bed: at the mound of her belly beneath the housecoat, at the puckered skin around her jaw, her swollen fingers squeezed by their many rings. The henna-tinted mop of a wig crumpled on the mattress next to her perfectly bald head.

That fall, when there were gas lines an hour long, and heating oil was at a premium, and the word Watergate was just becoming familiar, everything else in her life had fallen apart as well. With Geoffrey deferring to his father's lawyers, Zay and Richard had moved in together, into the apartment house on the edge of downtown. Richard could not stop apologizing about the arrangements—one room on the basement side of the building, a two-burner gas stove behind a stained folding screen, the bathroom down the hall. Until he met Zay, his rented room in the attic of an old house had been suitable for someone so rarely at home.

"It looks like we've hit bottom now," he said. "Literally and figuratively. From the heights to the depths." Doubt had made his baritone unsteady. "I couldn't find anything else, though, not for what we can afford, not so fast. We can move in right now, if you want. We can always look for something else later." He shook his head in resignation while Zay turned a slow, uneasy circle in the center of the room, taking in the radiator hanging from the ceiling, the plaster crumbling around the

pipes. The window with its view of a cement retaining wall. The layers of Congoleum that, in their wildly different colors and patterns and styles, presented themselves like an archaeologist's dream.

Remembering her parents, their descriptions of early travails, Zay had endeavored a tone of cheerfulness, good humor; she said that an apartment like this would be a memory in the making, something that in twenty years they would remember with fondness. They were starting out together, after all, and a little slice of poverty wouldn't hurt them, not when they'd been through so much already. It could only bring them closer together. She'd had enough of entitlement.

Richard had exhaled loudly, theatrically relieved, as she dumped her bag on the sagging mattress in its unpainted metal frame. But she really wasn't so sure, was she? No. No. *No*. And if she were honest with herself, not even when she declared it a love nest fit for Juliet. She wondered how much of her certainty had been forced upon her by Richard's doubt, her role as the positive one, the more experienced one. The one who—if she were honest with herself—had forced these changes upon them all. After all, she had to admit this as well, for all his faults and insecurities Geoffrey had never asked her to live like this.

So how could she have said anything different? There was Richard, still wearing his lab coat, his uniform as a student in dental school, his shoulders already rounded from bending over molds and X-rays, then bending over the mouths of charity patients who, according to Richard, never bathed, much less brushed or flossed. Even in those days when they were first together, guilty and determined and deliberately oblivious to the consequences they had already set in motion, his first act after coming back to his attic in the evening—before a kiss, before a hi-how-was-your-day—was to wash his face and hands with an antibacterial soap, never mind that he had done that before leaving school; he needed to put enough distance between the poverty of his own bad teeth and those whose mouths with their decay and neglect were symbolic of deeper disorders. His stuffiness and rigidity about such matters worried her. So different from what she had first imagined, and how different from their first rush toward one another! At Zay's urging he had grown a beard, but its sparse, erratic growth only made him look younger rather than more tolerant, a yeshiva student, perhaps, or a boy playing with a Halloween disguise. She would have ruffled his hair, if she weren't warned by his look of seriousness. Of purpose. And before she could make any such mistake, there was a knock on the door: *their door*, she had realized with a start.

"So, you kids want the place or not?"

"We'll move in today if that's all right." Richard held up the key. "We can get a second copy, can't we?"

At the entrance of the manager, Zay had turned away as though to inspect the refrigerator with its tiny freezer choked by frost, the pool of brown liquid in the bin labeled "meat"; her first glimpse of Mrs. Perls had been little more than a head of flaming red hair and a cigarette dangling between those elaborate nails.

"Sure. Any hardware store. I got a passkey, but I don't keep duplicates, so if you lose it, you lose it. Don't come to me crying."

Richard put the key in his pocket and ushered Mrs. Perls back into the hallway, offering his assurance of their fitness as tenants. The murmur of their voices reached Zay from far away, as waves heard from a cottage of childhood. It had been her mother's precept that life was lived in the main by people who slept through most of it, and it suddenly struck her that this was indeed a waking moment: I live here, she had thought, in this place, with my lover. I have thrown away my marriage for a basement apartment. And our landlady is an old harridan with a call girl's nails and the smeared lipstick of a floozy.

Her mother was right. One day you wake up and think, How in the world did I get here?

"Harridan," she had said, savoring the word. She sat down at the table underneath the narrow set of ground-level windows, examining in the half-light her own nails, which, during periods of turmoil, she had never been able to refrain from biting. Footsteps echoed just above her head. A pair of jeans and work boots, someone wrestling the garbage cans out of the alley. A waterfall of bottles cascaded into the city truck idling in the street in front of the building. Footsteps again, the cymbals' crash of empty cans. The roar of the truck backing up, retreating from the end of their dead-end street. Richard opening their door sheepishly. Like a husband.

"Honey," he had said, "I'm home."

The police stayed in Mrs. Perls's apartment for two hours or more, taking pictures and measurements, even after the ambulance arrived, sliding on the steep, icy streets. Mrs. Perls left the building in a body bag, her exit aided by two city employees who guided the gurney up the stairs to the entrance of the building, after which two police officers—a uniformed woman and an older man in plainclothes—sealed off the door-

way with yellow tape. Withdrawing a spiral notepad from his overcoat, the older detective, gray-haired and gray-faced, signaled Mrs. Dolby to follow him down the hall while the woman turned to face Zay.

"You live here?" She was one of those women who carry their weight above narrow hips and long, thin legs; a barrel chest and enormous bosom were further inflated by the bulky police jacket, putting Zay in mind of the Michelin tire advertisements. The policewoman, the recipient of a badly timed permanent, signs of which were still evident in the burn mark just below her hairline, folded her arms across her ample chest. "Across the hallway, I mean, from the deceased?"

"Yes."

"Officer Perry." The woman held out her badge, a gesture undermined by the small, square hand behind the badge, a hand surprisingly small and shapely. A recent manicure. "Mind if I come in, ask a few questions?"

"I have to go to work. I'm already an hour late."

"I'll just be a sec. I'll give you my card. Your boss can call me if need be."

Zay let the policewoman precede her into the apartment.

"I'll need your name," the policewoman said. "You know, as a witness."

So then she had to go through the whole story, that in a moment of whimsy, her mother had named her for a breeze. But Zephyr was not a name that anyone was liable to say and Z. sounded too cold, too much like unconsciousness or sleep. So Zay it was. At different points in her life, she had nearly changed her name just as she had recently changed her life. If the right impulse were to present itself she might yet become Linda, perhaps, or Gale—*another breeze!*—or Charlotte or Della or Yvonne. Heavens. But she had to admit that she felt more like Zay than any of these others, and Zay she was likely to stay.

"Interesting," the policewoman said, although it was clear she wasn't. "Are you married?"

So then she had to explain her separation. The divorce that was imminent. One more personal question and she would be inviting Officer Perry to dinner.

"You were the first one to find the body."

"She was lying in bed. I didn't touch her, though. I just moved the pillow. It was on top of her face." Zay stepped behind the folding screen with the clothes she had laid out on the bed what seemed like an eternity before. "I'm making some tea. Would you like some?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks. So, how did you happen to be in Mrs. Perls's apartment?"

"I was coming down the hall from the shower, and I heard this noise, so I went in." Zay filled the teapot then lit one of the burners. She shrugged into her bra and panties, skirt and blouse while waiting for the water to boil. "I can't even tell you what the noise was for sure. The lamp, I guess. When I tried the door, it was open, which was strange, because it was always locked. There must be half a dozen locks on the door, in case you haven't noticed. So then I found her on the bed, Mrs. Dolby must have heard me, and that's when we called. I called. End of story."

"About that cup of tea. Maybe I'll change my mind. If that's okay with you."

"Sure." Zay pushed the screen together and set it to one side. "Will you call my boss?"

"I'll call your boss. Give me the name and number. I'll call your boss from the squad car. I'll turn the siren on if she doesn't believe me."

Officer Perry scratched her head with the top of her pen. "Let me tell you, never let your sister-in-law experiment with your hair. But then, you don't look like the type. Go back a bit, will you? What happened during the hour or so before you found Mrs. Perls?"

"No, nothing. I took my shower. The power went off once, right in the middle of washing my hair, and I thought to myself, 'Great, I'll be finishing up in the dark.' The window in the bathroom's been painted over, you see, so it's like a tomb in there when the lights go off, which only happens when it rains, meaning they only go off like twice a day. But they came back on almost immediately. I got out, went down the hall, and that's when I heard something from Mrs. Perls's apartment."

"That's it?" Officer Perry sounded somewhat disappointed, as though she had expected some previously undisclosed revelation.

"That's it. Sorry."

If the detective really cared to know, she and Richard had been arguing. About stupid stuff. Laundry, breakfast, you name it. Not dish-breaking, insult-hurling argument, but the quiet, snarling, morning-after variety: "So, do you think we might have *underwear* by tonight?" Richard left while Zay was pulling her caftan over her head. One moment he was there, the next moment she was in the darkness of fabric, surrounded by the odor of her own body, when she heard the door close, and she was alone. Younger than she by three years and less experienced in the skirmishes of domestic life, he had discovered escape to be his



most effective weapon. She had turned on their garage sale Philco to the public radio station and listened while the high, unearthly tones of "Dôme épais" rose toward her ceiling. A braid of twin spirits. Then, after padding down the dark hallway in her socks and that filthy caftan, she had taken her shower at the end of the hall, in the chipped, claw-foot tub with its patched-together hose and nozzle, the ripped plastic curtain, all the while thinking about the passive-aggressive aspects of Richard's character and how infuriating it was—that his absence could pose as much turmoil as his presence. Especially since she knew the argument was really about her meeting Geoffrey for lunch the day before. He could be so tiresome, so petulant. Over nothing, a lunch. A lunch that had nothing to do with the *marriage* but everything to do with the *divorce*. Which she and Richard had prompted in the first place.

Three months after their breakup, Zay could not entirely understand that Geoffrey was no longer her husband in anything but the technical sense. When she saw him in the booth at Lubek's, hunched over, smoking a cigarette, his eyes underlined by shadow, she barely resisted the old impulse to put one hand on his cheek, bring his head down to her breast, the old habits pulled so strongly, to mother this boy who was five years her senior, the pattern of their marriage. Full of his usual woe and remorse, he had called Dr. Browning's office, where she worked as receptionist and general factotum. Called at 11:30, just in time for lunch.

"I wasn't going to call you, but then I called you," was his explanation.

"And here I am, just like always."

"Not quite," he said bringing the shadows under his eyes to bear fully upon her, "not quite like always."

"Why? Are you buying?"

When they had been married, Geoffrey had rarely been awake for lunch or ready with the money to purchase it. A member of an experimental theatrical troupe, Geoffrey was rarely home before three in the morning. He insisted that the group—although without a stage, a script, or financial backing and unlikely ever to have any one of the three—was on the verge of a major artistic breakthrough, but Zay believed any breakthrough was likely to be more cathartic for the actors—so self-involved were they—than for any potential audience. There were Lisa's revelations regarding her father's abuse of herself and her two sisters. Or Virgil's confession of his attraction to other men, a confession more

shocking to Virgil than it had been to anyone else. On such revelatory occasions, Geoffrey had come home, waking Zay to news that could have waited for a later hour of the morning. Geoffrey's own moments of self-laceration involved his father, that overbearing, overindulgent patriarch, from whose hand flowed fifty-dollar bills, the source of their marriage's last month's rent. The month before as well, come to think of it. In the wake of the separation, if there was any one person whom Zay was most sorry about disappointing, it was Geoffrey's father, whose reference and connections were responsible for Zay's position as Dr. Browning's receptionist and whose irony at Geoffrey's expense had always come to Zay's credit. She had once written a thank-you note and from that time forward she could do no wrong. The last Zay had heard, the theater group had disbanded—there was, finally, a point after which one could know too much about others—and Geoffrey's father was demanding his thirty-three-year-old son get a job. To be about his father's business.

Richard was another story altogether. The ambitious son of working-class parents without Geoffrey's sense of entitlement. A dental school student in his last year and one of Dr. Browning's patients, he had come to the office with a fever of 105, sweating and delirious. A staph infection picked up from the clinic and left untreated. She had told him that it was irresponsible, waiting so long to come in. "Who are you, to be talking about irresponsible?" he had said, looking at the red silk blouse she had debated about wearing that morning. A Christmas present from Geoffrey's parents. "I don't have the time to be sick. Much less the *money*."

Dark-haired, dark-eyed, nervously thin, burning with fever and plans. How different he was from Geoffrey's blond, well-fed, indistinct good looks! Even his teeth were wild, snagged and crooked, a walking advertisement for the need of his own services. He leaned into her window and stared down her blouse without bothering to disguise his desire. She imagined his body a kind of humming transmitter, set to a frequency she might receive.

She had looked up his phone number the next morning and, without telling him she was married, invited him for coffee the first day he was feeling better. "I'm feeling better now," he said. "How about this afternoon?"

They both had known why she had called, and they made love that first day in Richard's attic room in Richard's bed with its squealing springs and loose-limbed metal frame. Buttons scattered onto his floor when he tore at her blouse. She bit his shoulder, he pinned her wrists. He was still sweating from fever, his eyes were red-rimmed and blood-

shot, and his lovemaking was as furious and angry as it was quickly finished.

“What kind of game is this?” he had said afterwards, grabbing her finger with its wedding band, twisting it so she whimpered. “I don’t know why you’re here.”

And her only response was to be angry as well: “How should I know? Maybe I just wanted a poor boy. Someone to exploit. Someone with lousy teeth.”

She had hoped to hurt him while hurting Geoffrey at the same time, but to be truthful to herself, she had known—the moment she had entered Richard’s attic—that her life with Geoffrey was over. Geoffrey had stretched her loyalty too far. No matter how Richard responded. She had intended only the momentary encounter, she hadn’t counted on anything beyond an afternoon, she hadn’t expected Richard’s sense of *responsibility*, so novel in her experience with men, his underclass quest for a middle-class life and all its values. Her life thus far had consisted of a series of impulses: she had studied art in college because she had liked the cover of the art history text; she had married Geoffrey because when they first met, the sun had been behind him and the tips of his hair had glowed; and now there was Richard, whose temper and energy and ambition seemed an answer to the lethargy and aimlessness that had grown over her like moss over a rock during the previous three years.

Now, Geoffrey shifted forward in his seat. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, ‘Here it comes, Geoffrey’s going to start begging. *Come back, Zay, oh please, oh please, oh.*’ I’m not going to do that. I have a little more pride than that.”

“I never thought any such thing,” Zay said, though frankly the dread of such a scene had nearly kept her away. Even as it had been the source of some fascination. But, now that it was not to occur, she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of disappointment. “Give me a little credit. Give yourself some credit.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m seeing someone, so as far as a divorce is concerned, I’d just as soon make it a quick one.”

*What was this?*

“Look, right before the group busted up, Anne and I got together. If you want to know the truth, we had a little thing going even before you left. I didn’t tell you about it because I was a little embarrassed, and I didn’t want you to think I was just trying to one-up you.”

Anne Berquist, that little ferret? Who, along with her shrewd, close-set eyes and tiny, pinched face, had the most enormous breasts for a girl so short and sparing otherwise.

"You're not serious."

"Dad's pissed," Geoffrey said. "He's still mad about you leaving. He hates Anne, by the way, no surprise there. Which doesn't make me unhappy either."

He and Anne were planning to get married once she finished her degree. A June wedding. And Geoffrey was interviewing for positions with various companies, all in sales. It was amazing, he said, how many places thought that an actor was exactly the sort of person they needed to push a product. Insurance, real estate, pharmaceuticals, you name it. He had even interviewed with a yacht dealership. *Yachts!* He was excited, there was no getting around it, but he refused to look her in the eye.

"So, I can't be bitter anymore," Geoffrey said. "I don't have it in me. How's your dentist?"

Zay spent the remainder of her lunch hour fighting the sense of being blinded, as if she were sitting by a window in full view of an afternoon sun so bright that sight was blotted out. What had she done? To all appearances, Geoffrey was happy and no longer in need of her help. He had Anne for that now. He didn't need Zay any longer. That's what he had called to tell her. That this was the outcome of her grand, impulsive passion: to free him for his own. To free him for his life. To give her back a legitimacy she had never wanted. And this was what Richard was so put out about, storming off this morning? This was the worst she could do?

Men could be such idiots.

Not long after Richard graduated, they moved to the homely heart of California, to the constant light and heat and dust of farmland, leaving the rain and the gloom and their underground apartment for good. Richard had a connection—a friend of a friend of a friend; even among the working class there are such inbred associations—and an established practice was waiting for him. After years of scholarships, he was that rarest of creatures, a dentist without debt. He did not even have to buy his own equipment. Money poured in after their months of thrift. During those first years—despite all her best intentions and Richard's new-found means—she was still homesick for the dark winter of the Northwest, but then Mount St. Helens erupted, and it seemed to be a kind of signal to Zay that whatever life she knew in Oregon was over. She was already a mother by then of two girls, but not until the curtain of ash began to rain down on the forests and rivers, not until she watched those

televised moments, did she know that something irrevocable had occurred. And not just for those in the immediate vicinity. Even now, so many years later, she asks herself this: if the ice-cream cone of St. Helens were still intact, would she still be here in this artificial land of bird-of-paradise and palm tree, guava and perennial roses? Is this the only life she might have lived, is this the only life she has inhabited? Every time she looks in the mirror she sees someone she might have known once upon a time: this middle-aged stranger whose hair belongs to her mother. There is a dowdiness she never would have recognized. When did that happen? The answer is certain even as it is less than conclusive, just as beyond her son's bedroom door there is certain to be the sleeping boy in the form of a man, although there is also the possibility that were she to open this door, she would find nothing more than the signature of the male: his escape—an opened window, its curtain flapping outside, caught like a flag in the morning breeze.

“Mrs. Beringson. Zay.” Officer Perry put a hand on Zay’s knee and shook it, a form of threat in this gesture, for which Zay was unprepared. “I lost you for a moment. Are you sure there wasn’t anything else?”

“No. Absolutely nothing. I can’t think of a thing.”

“Nothing? Nothing about previous encounters with the deceased?”

“I hardly ever saw her. Today was the first time I ever walked through the door. It’s crazy.”

“Maybe,” Officer Perry said, scratching her scalp again, “but maybe it’s not any crazier than believing your sister-in-law knows what to do with a Toni. Listen, call me if you think of anything else. I may be in touch with you later. If we have any other questions.”

“Of course. But I don’t really know anything other than what I told you.”

The older woman stood up, straightening her belt over the bulges of her polyester trousers. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Don’t forget to call my boss, okay?”

Zay moved through the rest of that morning as though paralyzed; her mind was working while her extremities remained numb. After standing in the freezing rain for twenty minutes, she caught the bus for work, and two stops later an enormous woman with three large shopping bags sat next to her. She sat down with a grunt, her shopping bags and a very wet umbrella wedged against Zay’s legs. Zay turned her face to the window and listened to the woman breathe until it was time to get

off. When she stood to move out into the aisle, the woman barely moved, and Zay was forced to climb over a pair of massive knees and thighs, as though she were scaling a series of damp ledges. At the office, after a stern lecture from Dr. Browning—he had been forced to field his own phone calls, not one of which was from Officer Perry after all—she sat at her receptionist’s window, taking names and making appointments with the absentminded attention of a driver on a stretch of too-familiar highway. By the end of the day, she could not have said what it was that she had done during the day; not one caller’s description of pain or symptom, behavior or reaction could replace the picture she retained of Mrs. Perls’s body, and her accompanying wig.

That evening, when Richard came home, he carried a paper cone of flowers. Apology for the morning’s argument. She cleaned out a jar and cut the stems while he struggled out of his overcoat and lab coat and sorted out the books and assignments jumbled together in his backpack.

“What’s with the tape across the hall? It almost looks like a crime scene or something.”

She told him the story, going over it again as she had for Officer Perry, about coming out of the shower, her long thick hair wet and turbaned in a towel on top of her head, and then, as she came down the hall, hearing something, that thump or bump, a phantom sound. Maybe the headboard against the plaster wall? Then a crash. Then the sight of Mrs. Perls on her bed. The wig next to her. The opened pill bottles. The ceramic shards of the lamp on the floor. Mrs. Dolby accusing her silently of murder.

“Poor Zay, poor baby,” Richard said, holding her. “What a lousy, mean-spirited thing. The old biddy.”

I’m so sorry. *So sorry.*

She would remember that moment as the sweetest they would ever have. A melting into each other when Richard’s insistence during sex was matched by her own energy and resolve. Her own claims. Two equal combatants. Nothing after would ever quite live up to its promise, although she wouldn’t notice this for years to come.

In the days to come, Zay *would* notice other changes: the yellow tape across Mrs. Perls’s door would slowly droop from the door frame, like a badly tied hair ribbon, until one day it simply disappeared and the manager’s apartment was occupied by an elderly couple whose energy with paintbrushes and cleaning rags, hammer and nails, pipe wrenches and pliers was impossible to ignore.

The cold of that icy, unheated winter would likewise give way to

the warm rain of an early spring, and then one day Officer Perry showed up at the door of their apartment. Raindrops were jeweled in the frizz of her still-damaged hair.

"Listen," she said, "I've been meaning to stop by. And it looks like I came in the nick of time."

Zay was standing in the middle of their apartment, surrounded by empty and half-filled boxes. Soon enough, she and Richard would be climbing the stairs to the front door with those same boxes and shoving them inside a small rental van, but now, although their door was open, the police officer blocked the threshold.

"You're moving."

"Yes. To California. My husband—my fiancé, actually—has a job there."

"How nice for you."

"I suppose it is. I've never lived anywhere but here. In Oregon, that is. Not this building."

The police officer laughed. "I meant a husband with a job. That's nice."

Zay, too, was laughing. She couldn't help it; suddenly, it was all so funny. "It is nice, isn't it?"

"I hope he makes a ton of money. And you can lie around all day, eating bonbons and drinking Scotch."

"That does sound like fun," she said, but as though down a long hallway of years, she had a glimpse of herself, waking late to a morning of alien expectation, and fun was not an accurate description. No, not quite. "Well, it would be a change."

Their boxes lay around her, waiting for her attention. Richard's textbooks, her clothes. Objects of optimism and fate.

"I should probably get busy," she said.

"And I won't keep you," the officer said. "I just wanted to let you know that the final ruling was suicide, after all. The old lady had more junk in her system than Hendrix."

*What else could it have been?*

"Your neighbor didn't do you any favors, you know."

"Mrs. Dolby," Zay said.

"She said she saw you suffocating Mrs. Perls. She said she caught you in the act. You were holding a pillow over her face. She said she saw Mrs. Perls's legs kicking."

"But I told her," Zay said. "The only thing I did with that pillow was to move it. She saw the pill bottles."

"She left a note, you know. That was the clincher."

"I never saw it."

"She was dying anyway, and she knew it. Cancer of something-or-other. There was no point in fighting it, she said. All those pictures on the walls? She wasn't just a fan. She'd had a thing for Sinatra for years, she went to Vegas every chance she got, but he wasn't interested. Like there was a chance. There was one line from the note I remember: 'I'm an old, tired, unhappy woman, and there are others to take my place.' How about that?"

Zay shook her head. Amazing. How could she have missed it? So cold and wet with the window open and the rain blowing in, and she must have been in shock. She can't be sure that anything she remembers is the truth. Mrs. Perl's death might be a story she's telling to herself.

"I can't believe I never saw it," she said finally.

"You remember how she must have pushed the lamp off her end table? The note was in her *other* hand. She was holding it in her fist. The coroner had to pry it from her fingers."

Wasn't that always the way? You look in one direction, but the answer always lies in another.

"But I can't believe Mrs. Dolby would do that. Lie like that."

"People see what they want to see. Anyway, it's over now, and you're in the clear. You and your boyfriend can move to California, and you can put this behind you."

She has done just that, she has put it behind her, and for nearly thirty years she has been caught in the stew of an ordinary life. Her decisions have never been deliberate, never calculated or weighed in any rational sense, but she has been satisfied with the outcome nonetheless. Everything has turned out all right. Yes, it has. *Really*. She will insist upon that to anyone who asks. Babies and diapers, Richard's practice and their secure place with the others of their kind. Richard introduces her to colleagues as his rock, his reason for being, and maybe it is a kind of truth, but Zay better understands the necessity of the lie. They have no great love for one another, not now. After so many years, their marriage has turned into a kind of settling, and they do not often speak of the turmoil that marked their beginnings, preferring the realism of their years together rather than their first romantic gestures, those moments of passion, accusation, and reconciliation. They have turned her impulse into a life.

Since coming to California, they have made three more moves, one



every ten years or so, each time into a progressively larger, more distinguished home. Their latest—six bedrooms, two stories, on five hillside acres overlooking dry riverbed—is so much larger than necessary, especially now that their daughters are gone and their son is nearly so, but they have no plans for contraction or economy in this next decade of life. They have chosen to move forward and forward only and forestall any chance of regret. Which makes it difficult to know why she is being haunted by Mrs. Perls just now, Mrs. Perls with her wigs and her rings and her photographs.

Zay sometimes thinks of her life as a series of layers and layers. Of nothing profound, mind you, just the detritus of life: of soda pop and toothpaste, file folders and paperweights, the mundane objects of the everyday. If someone were to excavate her memory, he would need to make sense of such trash first. Mrs. Perls, on the other hand, is of a different order. Buried years ago under a mound of minor concerns but resurrected for some reason, still able to beckon.

One o'clock. Her son, wearing boxers and a T-shirt, wanders into the kitchen where Zay, while eating her lunch, is trying to read an article about the East German dissident Vera Wollenberger. After the opening of secret police files, Vera Wollenberger discovered that her own husband had been her most damaging informer. It may be a revelation for historians, this betrayal, but hardly a newflash for husbands and wives. Zay wonders why anyone should be surprised. Even in the best of circumstances, a marriage is a kind of betrayal, an exchange of an ideal for a reality. Different only in degree. Her son is so sleep-fuddled that he runs into the refrigerator before opening it to peer inside.

"Oh, man," he says. "There's nothing in here to eat."

"There's ham on the bottom shelf, cheese in the bin," Zay says by rote. "Make yourself a sandwich."

*The week after her discovery she divorced the man code-named Donald.*

"Boring."

"Too bad."

He looks once more into the refrigerator's clutter before letting the door swing shut. "Ah, fuck it," he yawns. He looks at his mother. He looks *through* his mother. As though she were a window. "I'm going back to bed."

"Fine. You do that."

Has she become invisible now, as well?

Did Vera Wollenberger confront her husband, she wonders, or did she move out one night without a word of either accusation or explanation?

*I can't really say how I felt, Vera Wollenberger told reporters. It was such an extreme situation, rather as if one had died for a moment, and then returned to life. The surprising thing was the reports were written as if about a stranger, not about a wife. To him I was an enemy of the state, and he had done everything to fight me—the enemy.*

Enough, enough. Time to go shopping for dinner. She gets her purse, finds her keys, and passing by the closed door of her son's room, taps her fingers to the wood. *Good-bye.*

Her drive is not long. Two miles of sanitized streets and look-alike strip malls. In the supermarket, she retrieves a cart and wheels it through swept aisles of cat food and laundry detergent, pork chops and eggs and heads of lettuce. She will make enchiladas tonight, so she buys tortillas and cheese and chiles and sauce. Black beans and Spanish rice for the sides. This will be nice, she thinks. A California dinner. Richard will be pleased. But for some reason she cannot rid herself of the picture of Mrs. Perls's face, her body on the bed, the wig next to her head. She feels what it must be like to come to the end of things, and she pays for her groceries while shaking her head so violently that the checker must surely think she has some disagreement about the cost of living.

Leaving the parking lot.

*Why is she revisiting all this now?*

She is fighting it, that's the way it feels, as though she's holding on by her fingers, this slipping out of one life, one time, and into another. Fighting it. She is leaning to the other side of the seat for the phone in the glove compartment. She needs to call Richard, maybe her son. Why? She doesn't know exactly. Maybe that by speaking to one of them, she'll be able to hang on to the present moment and let the past die from neglect.

Her eyes are on the parking lot the entire time, but while she fumbles for the phone in the midst of clutter—the gas slips and maps and owner's manual—she finds herself slipping from the road to the glove box and she doesn't wake until it is too late: an SUV, one of those lumbering giants, has backed out of its parking space, wallowing across the asphalt, and Zay, distracted, doesn't see it. She reacts an instant too late. The smash of chrome and the tinkling bells of shattered headlight glass echo across the parking lot. She is still ransacking the glove box when her head lurches toward the dashboard. *Oh, where has she gone now?*

The evening after her lunch with Geoffrey, she had come home, busy with plans. She would do the laundry, change the sheets, make dinner, make amends. She had stepped off the bus three stops before her own in order to shop for their dinner. Something simple and cheap that might also pass for complicated and expensive. A bottle of wine, a lasagne, maybe. She trudged up the hill from the store with two grocery sacks in her arms, holding on tight to the bag with the wine, while a steady drizzle fell. Cars and trucks raced through the rain, sending up rooster tails of spray from the wet pavement while their wipers slapped back and forth. She shivered in the chill and struggled to keep her balance as the sidewalk turned to ice. Ah, but finally the gray clapboard sides of the Hill Villa emerged from the gray mist, and she walked down the stairs to the front door, juggling keys and bags like some sort of circus performer. One of those plate spinners on Ed Sullivan, maybe. Inside the door she set down the groceries and, taking off her scarf, shook out her hair.

"Well, look at you." Mrs. Perls standing in her doorway with cigarette and whiskey glass held in the same hand. "You're so young, aren't you? So pretty. Extraordinary. You and your long, thick hair. I'll bet you have men falling in love with you eight days a week."

"I wouldn't say that," Zay said. "Not exactly."

"Don't be so modest. I've seen your type come and go." A gust of acrid smoke escaped along with the older woman's bitter laugh. "Don't take me seriously. I'm old and envious. I looked like you once upon a time. I had a figure. And hair like yours. Don't laugh, it's true."

"I wasn't laughing."

"I dated Sinatra, you know."

"I didn't," Zay said. "I didn't know that."

"Me and Frank. Swanky Frankie. Three weeks at the Sands. It was fun while it lasted. Then he sends me a nightgown and roses, and I knew my goose was cooked."

Mrs. Perls dropped her cigarette to the wood floor of the hallway, stepping on it with the toe of her carpet slipper.

"Now, you," she said. "You smell like sex. In the present tense, I might add. And not with your little Poindexter."

So that's when Zay stumbled, one of her knees must have buckled at just that moment, and down she went like a pile of sticks. In front of her own apartment door, no less.

"Hey, hey. Little Miss Cream Puff," Mrs. Perls said, standing over her. "Maybe you need to eat something, maybe."

*How did the old witch know?*

How could she have known that lunch with Geoffrey had turned into an afternoon with Geoffrey, a farewell to the marriage for old times' sake? She hadn't meant for it to happen, but they were husband and wife, still, no matter what has happened recently, and old habits never really die. Besides there's no harm done, not really, not when it's just between herself and Geoffrey and doesn't concern anyone else. No one else needs to know. She got to her feet, a little unsteady in her ridiculous shoes. Her groceries were scattered across the hallway floor. The bottle of wine, miraculously unbroken, had rolled three doors down. Somehow she unlocked and opened her door, got herself and the elements of dinner inside, piece by piece. And then, there was not even time to sit down at the table and make a cup of tea before making her dinner of atonement when there was a knock on the door, and who could it be but Mrs. Perls again, holding a can of tomatoes that must have escaped her earlier.

Mrs. Perls has her tomatoes and a shoebox under her arm. She's had her Scotch and now she's turned into Chatty Cathy after weeks of silence and indifference. Mrs. Perls believes that Zay is just the person to look at her photographs, the record of her life. Just the person to understand the sort of person Mrs. Perls is. Well, she isn't, she has to cook dinner and maybe start that bottle of wine if she is to keep going, if she is to get through this night, but she can't say no to their landlady, now can she?

Mrs. Perls is nattering on. Sinatra and Dean Martin, Bing Crosby and Hope and Astaire and Danny Kaye and all those old warhorses from the '40s and '50s. Who gives a shit, she wants to say. Who gives a shit? Mrs. Perls is full of inside stories and she knows from personal experience which one of the boys had the biggest *shlong* and which one was all talk. Zay can't remember which is which. They're all full of it, she thinks. There's the back of Mrs. Perls's head, her red hair that looks suspiciously like a wig because it's too perfectly coiffed to belong to someone living, and then there's the way she sorts through her collection of photographs as though she would like to dive into the box of her past, disappear into it, she has just the picture she wants to show Zay, a picture of herself thirty years ago. I was about four years old, Mrs. Perls says, then laughs at her own lie. Maybe fourteen. *Ha, ha, ha*. What a joke.

Yes, Mrs. Perls says. Here it is. She brandishes a snapshot and holds it for Zay to inspect. A professional must have taken this, Zay sees. Someone with some craft, albeit a few decades out of date. Mrs. Perls, ever so much younger, naked in some phony pose on a fainting couch, her long hair coiled around her breasts as though playing Godiva. Even so, take away the ferns and the columns and it's impossible for Zay to miss it,

how much she herself resembles this younger incarnation of Mrs. Perls.

Look, Mrs. Perls is saying. Look here's another one. Me and Bogart before he met Bacall. Oh, she was a sly one, all right.

Her pasta is sitting on the table. Water must be put to boil, the sauce must be prepared.

Mrs. Perls holds up a snapshot of Gable. I could tell you stories, she says and seems about to start.

What I wouldn't give, Zay thinks. What I wouldn't give to see this old lady dead.