

## *The Blue Cloak*

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It was one of the many ironies of their married life that Grimshaw's wife was never more amorous than when the house was filled with overnight guests. This was also true on the occasions of visits to friends and family, when they slept in beds not their own, when their love cries were well within ear-shot of others.

One might have suspected that at the root of her desires lay a compulsion to mock the social convention that would restrict romantic coupling to darkness and silence and the privacy of that group of two. Yet who could have predicted this of her? For Grimshaw's wife was the daughter of midwestern burghers,

members of a conservative clan, whose topics of conversation were restricted by certain covenants: omitting the specific dollar amounts of financial transactions, discussing politics only in the abstract, and remarking the relationships of men and women as long as this was confined to the driest possible record of marriage and divorce, illness and recovery, birth and death.

In appearance she was the possessor of a face as perfectly molded as marble and yet as bland and unremarkable as a white sauce, hair the color of new corn, eyes that mirrored nothing but the blue sky overhead. She was tall, and her figure was full and ripe, her skin was flawless, a perfection having less to do with superiority than it did with negation, an absence of defect. As an attractive woman, she evoked her share of scrutiny at social gatherings, but early in life it seemed that she had learned one proverb and learned it well—*a fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards*—and her observers quickly understood that there was little beyond the decoration of her appearance except a second taciturn veneer. Even those kind souls who insisted on the presence of still waters finally resigned themselves to their own failure; unwilling to admit her fundamental superficiality, they claimed her reservoir of calm to be too deep. Upon their first meeting, Grimshaw could not have said whether she were fool or wise either—was it possible that in withholding herself she was giving vent to all that she knew?

She resisted all entreaties for conversation that she could, and those responses she could not avoid making, she limited to one breath or less. Under pressure from her family, she had once entered the Miss Hamilton County Pageant. During the interview, in response to the question of what she hoped for the future of humanity, she had stared bravely into the eye of the camera and said, "I would like to see fast food eliminated. I don't believe that so much speed in a person's eating habits can be good for anyone." The audience and judges were stunned. At that point she had been leading on the strength of her performance in the first two portions of the contest: swim suit (red, such lovely contours) and talent (uneven parallel bars to the tune of "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face").

He was dealing with an extraordinary intelligence, he knew that much already; when he asked her to marry him, her response

was typically oblique.

"Well," she said. Her top teeth touched her full bottom lip for one brief moment; she seemed puzzled and not a little bit irritated. "Well," she said again, "if you promise never to cut your toenails in the living room and then leave them on the carpet. My father does that, and it makes my mother hysterical."

He swore an oath of cleanliness, and that was that. If Grimshaw had harbored any secret desire for his proposal to prompt some sort of breakthrough—either communicative or analytical—he would have been sadly disappointed. The truth, however, was just the opposite. To those who asked directly, Grimshaw would freely admit that he had married her for her vacuity as well as her compromised beauty, that he had joined himself to her precisely for her lack of complexity, recognizing that his own ego, shaky enough even when accorded center stage and top billing, would not tolerate the competition of sharing.

He had married her, in short, to lie still. So, to discover this one quirk—that his vegetable wife could be transformed by strange beds or the presence of visitors into his agile mistress, his nubile Salome—was a shock, to put it mildly. During those days and weeks when company came to visit, the dark hours of night turned her oblivious passivity into erotic will and their bedroom into a bordello, a red room of wonders, leaving him bewildered as well as exhausted. She was beautiful, she was dim, and periodically she turned into a temptress whose skills rivaled his own adolescent fantasies. Year after year, it was a shock that did not lose its value.

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He noted more than once that his wife's periodic passions could also contain a hint of sly aggressiveness. Within the first year of their marriage, while he attended graduate school in Los Angeles and Clair kept their student housing apartment in haphazard order, his maternal grandfather died. After years of one alcoholic illness after another, the old man—an artist, a crank, and a cauldron of unpredictable tempers—had finally yielded. His liver must have been a prune at the last, and his passing caused less mourning than ambivalence.

This was the lost, last summer of Watergate. Grimshaw typed the final draft of his dissertation—a comparative study of tax law during the Johnson, Grant, and Hayes administrations—while the daily soap opera of the hearings burred in the next room. His mother, herself recently separated from her second husband, flew immediately to Birmingham to comfort her mother and to superintend the details of her father's burial; he and Clair left two weeks later, his dissertation finished and Nixon forced from office.

They arrived in sweltering August humidity and were met at the airport by his mother and grandmother. The older women had become sisters of widowhood, it seemed, both gray-haired, adorned in cotton print dresses and sensible shoes, both eager to please the young; one was simply more stooped, more shriveled by age than the other. At his grandmother's, he and Clair were ushered up the dark creaking staircase, then through a still darker hall to the master bedroom and the only full-sized mattress in the house.

"We can't, Mamaw," Grimshaw said, feeling their presence now in his grandmother's grief to constitute a kind of invasion. "We can't take your room."

"Don't be silly." The old woman stood before them, full of the sprightly good humor of the survivor. "I haven't used this room in months. Anymore, my legs prefer ground level."

"You have the whole top floor to yourselves," his mother added, noting that she too was occupying a room downstairs.

"Thank you," Clair said—the first words she'd volunteered without benefit of either prompt or question.

Without warning or preamble, his lively mother suddenly embraced his reticent wife. "Thank you both for coming," she said. "I know it's difficult to get away, you're both so busy."

"And still practically newlyweds," his grandmother added.

"Yes, that's true, isn't it?" his mother said, holding Clair's shoulders, measuring, it seemed, Clair's posture, her substance so rarely given voice.

He had never been able to explain to his family's satisfaction why he had married her other than sex, and embarrassed now that such innuendo should come from his mother and grandmother,

Grimshaw said, "Oh, I think we're beyond that."

They did not bother to hide their amusement.

"I just meant that we don't have to hang on each other all the time," he said. "Not like some."

"Thank you," Clair said suddenly, "for your bed. We very much appreciate it."

It was one of her most coherent statements.

"That's all right, dear," his mother said, stroking both of Clair's arms. "Quite all right."

"We're happy to do it," his grandmother said. "We're happy for you, Robert," she said, then winked.

And so it was that four hours later, at the stroke of nine o'clock, the two older women yawned, announced their fatigue, and proclaimed their intention of going to bed, leaving Grimshaw and his wife alone in the front parlor with his books and her magazines. The mantelpiece clock loudly marked the seconds. From nearby rooms came the soft dry sounds of his mother and grandmother undressing, then dressing for bed, then the sound of water running through the pipes before—with the squeal of old plumbing, old valves—it ceased.

"Bobby?"

Her voice had dropped an octave, and he was not so callous yet that such an overture—this one word, his name, spoken in such throaty tones by this different creature, this second wife—failed to stir him. He nearly stopped breathing. They began to shed clothing in the staircase, finding new purposes for the landing, discovering that wood, in sympathy with the animal kingdom, bends and breathes and, as such, speaks.

In recalling the first night of this visit, Grimshaw would remember the sensation as slapstick, pure vaudeville, as if the entire house, keeping time to their rhythms, were registering the wind-whipped moaning of a northern storm, especially when they had ascended to the top of the stairs, turned right, then right again to collapse into his grandparents' bed, only to find after the crash, the tenuous sound of splintering, that—no Hollywood bedframe—it too was wood: wood frame, wood slats, a mahogany headboard placed in unfortunate proximity to the bedroom wall. A laugh track would not have surprised him.

He would also remember whispering “Clair, Clair, Clair,” over and over as a kind of fool’s mantra against the noise and racket that they and this bed were making. She was even then looming above him, riding his hips, gripping him with thighs and pelvis, each of them slipping against the other in a fine film of sweat and exercise, and at each new direction their bodies took, she yelped louder and in increasingly higher pitch, a Charo imitation: *Ai, ai, aiye*. He could only imagine the mutation of those sounds, echoing down hallway and stairs and chimney, traveling the length and breadth of studs and joists and headers, cascading through the opened second-story windows into the sticky Alabama night. He would have shushed her if it would not have seemed like such a silly prudery, like a horrible breach of the sexual contract. A betrayal of his wife’s one true voice. He could not do it. Not at nine o’clock, not at midnight, nor at three, their coitus denoting cycles of life and death and regeneration in regular three-hour intervals.

That morning he rose unsteadily into cruel sunshine. Clair slept, the sound of her breathing a machinery hum. His mother and grandmother sat in the shade of the back porch, drinking coffee. They looked at him as he sat down, and the look they gave him was knowing, their faces showing the lines of their respective ages, their matching gray heads exhibiting a matching disarray, a matching fatigue underneath their careful irony.

“Sleep well?” his grandmother said.

“I’m sorry if we bothered you.” He wanted to say that he and Clair were never like this when alone, but how could he? He might as well have accused his mother and grandmother of being responsible for Clair’s sexual behavior as well as his own.

“We slept like babes,” his mother said, somewhat fiercely, he thought.

“Heavens, yes,” his grandmother added. “Babes.”

From the back porch the three of them—for a considerable time—pondered the backyard in uneasy silence. In the force of the August sun, the grass appeared too green, too real, too insistent upon its own presence.

“Your house and yard are lovely.” Clair stood behind them, brushing her hair, gazing into the same middle distance. Water from the shower beaded her forehead. Her blue bathrobe was

loosely tied, and as she brushed her hair, it threatened, inch by inch, to fall open.

His mother stood and, in lieu of a hug, pulled the sides of Clair's bathrobe together.

"Good morning, dear," his mother said, giving her daughter-in-law a kiss on one cheek.

Grimshaw could not have said what she truly meant.

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The apprehension of sexuality is never more acute than when suffered with one's own family, and Grimshaw felt this now keenly as he shared his mother and grandmother's discomfort. He watched his mother patting the lapels of Clair's bathrobe. He watched, too, as Clair smiled, and in that instant, he knew that he had been watching a contest all along, that Clair was now the only one with a husband, a partner with whom one could share staircases and kitchen tables and bathroom floors and most especially beds—beds of whatever description and volume. And he understood further that—on whatever level of consciousness—Clair knew that she had won this unadvertised battle; she had marked her territory, and all that she saw was hers.

Later that same day, his grandmother showed them in to each of the rooms in her disorderly old house, giving Clair her first official tour. At the back of the second story were his grandfather's studio and study, unused now and unchanged for the past ten years. The house, so noticeable for its lack of decoration, had collected all its adornment here: the walls of both rooms, those not made of glass, were covered with canvases and prints of his grandfather's work and copies of other artists from the ancients to the moderns.

"It is very beautiful," Clair said.

"It's a goddamn mess," his mother said.

"Well," his grandmother said, ignoring his mother, "if we looked even the littlest bit, I bet we'd find half a dozen bottles of bourbon at least, he loved his whiskey so."

"I meant that it is very beautiful," Clair said again, "that you kept it this way."

"Then I shall have to give you something to take before you go," his grandmother declared. "Something to remember your visit by."

"We'll need to dust first, Mother," Grimshaw's mother said. She turned and spoke to Grimshaw: "If you hear retching, that will be us."

"You shush," his grandmother said. "Clair, you shall have something special." It was a promise made in passing, and Grimshaw thought little of it until his grandmother produced a mailing tube just before he and Clair were to board their flight back to Los Angeles. She handed the tube to Clair. "I debated a long time, Robert, so don't tell me if you don't like my selection. You're welcome to anything else in Edgar's collection when you get settled in a place of your own."

They flew with the mailing tube riding above them in the overhead compartment. Then, after changing planes in Dallas, they carried it to their next flight, and a flight attendant stored it in the coat compartment of the crowded 727. They did not have a chance to open it until they boarded the shuttle bus from LAX to Westwood.

Grimshaw had expected one of his grandfather's lithographs; but instead of the fine straight lines, the precise circles and squares of his grandfather's *Flatland*-inspired prints, Grimshaw unrolled a badly reproduced poster of Brueghel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*. It was one of his grandfather's favorites, he knew; this poster had hung near his easel in a cheap black frame for as long as he could remember. During one visit to his grandfather's studio, he had been made to look at it for an hour or more while his grandfather traced the structural development of the painting's composition: the painstaking detail of one hundred proverbs brought to life.

Grimshaw was twelve years old at the time. His grandfather had been drinking as usual, and he was ashamed of the confusion that the old man inspired in him. Still, it was the sort of painting that a twelve-year-old boy could find infinitely fascinating, with its depiction of old sayings now archaic or unintelligible by language and culture—of devils and demons, pissing and shitting, nakedness and unaccountable sadism, a sort of scatological *What's Wrong with This Picture?*, a graphic illustration of chaos as the golden mean of human behavior. Now it seemed merely hideous



and crude, full of medieval perversity, colored as it was by the memory of his grandfather and his grandfather's lecture.

"What colors do you see?" the old man had said. The question was rhetorical, for his role was but to listen. "All these muddy browns, the color of shit. Just a backdrop for the spots of blue and red. Which is precisely the point. Red is the color of sin, blue the color of folly. That's the lesson, boy, and you'd do well to learn it now instead of later. Where's Christ? Where's Jesus? A nickel if you can find Jesus," his grandfather had boomed like some sort of tent preacher gone sour. Grimshaw had looked, but the blank-eyed caricatures swam before his eyes, the clutter of human folly and sin too overwhelming. "You see here," his grandfather's finger had identified the figure of Christ in the right foreground, "here he is, sitting on a blue chair getting bearded by a monk in a red robe. Or over here," the finger jabbed the left center, "an upside-down globe, upside-down and blue it is. *Verkeerd*—the Netherlandish word that means both upside-down and wrong. And look at the little red son of a bitch in the window above the world. Got his pants down, giving it the moon. Just below that some fool biting a pillar, the Dutch equivalent of a hypocrite. And what do you think Herr Brueghel puts in the center foreground? Some dishy little slut in a red dress putting a blue cloak over the head of an old man with a crutch. Probably her husband. That's the way the proverb goes: '*Foukens die gern hier en daer den offer ontfangen / Moeten haer mans de blau huycke omhangen*'—'The woman who gladly welcomes favors here and there / Must hang the blue coat round her husband.' She's putting one over him, you bet. And down at her feet, some fool filling a well after the calf has drowned. Our version of closing the barn door after the horse has run."

His grandfather had stood with him in front of the picture, muttering, "Stupidity and foolishness, deceit and despair." And then, before he poured another drink for himself, he pointed to one last figure: a man ramming his head against a wall. His grandfather had saluted the man with the water glass of bourbon. "Fucking life in a fucking nutshell."

He and Clair looked at the poster while the shuttle bus came to a complete stop on the San Diego Freeway. Traffic surrounded them on all sides while blue exhaust rose into the sweet, ocean-

scented air. This poster held memories for him, but his grandmother had made it clear that it was a memento of Clair's first visit. What resonance could there possibly be for her? he wondered. She would look at the blue cloak and think a good deed was being done. What could his grandmother have been thinking?

"It's lovely," Clair said.

"What's lovely about it?" Normally he would never challenge his wife's innocent judgments, but cross as he was becoming with the discovery of this gift, he couldn't help himself.

"Everyone seems so . . ." For a moment her eyes looked frantic, as if she, his stolid wife, were about to cry. "Everyone seems so *busy*."

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The news that Clair might envy the busy lives of Brueghel's fools did not entirely surprise him, but it did raise unsettling questions. For what unspoken dreams did his silent wife yearn? To what busy foolishness did she wish to commit herself? The thought that there might be some burning, transparent hole within his otherwise opaque wife occasionally struck him in the middle of the night with the force of nightmare and revelation—a dark window and a face illuminated by lightning—causing him to bolt upright in bed, his breathing rapid, his heartbeat erratic, only to discover once again Clair's body stretched long against his own, and the air humming with her placid and contented snore. His alarm was only a trick of sleep, an illusion of his subconscious mind. And yet, try as he might, his vision of Clair as a creature of plain surfaces would be forever altered, clouded by the shadow and presentiment of depths heretofore unsuspected.

Following his degree, Grimshaw took a teaching job at a small college in the state of Washington. He had hoped for a larger, more distinguished school, a university of ivy and tradition; in the end, however, he settled for prefabricated classrooms on an estate bequeathed by a chemical manufacturer with a bad conscience. His colleagues were frights, the administration tight-fisted. During a cocktail party in honor of new faculty, he was told by more than one person that the college had been in a steep decline for years.

And yet this was now his college and his position! Clair seemed genuinely happy to make the move to the damp darkness of the Northwest, and on the promise of his modest salary, they made a down payment on a cottage overlooking Lake Washington. So what if his college was second-rate and his department filled with monsters and buffoons? He could still take delight in this house and its view of waters and a setting sun. They quickly bought furniture and amassed debt like a talisman. How could they fire him if he owed so much money? Clair, although agreeable to all his selections, was adamant about only one item: over his objections, the Brueghel poster was framed and given a place of prominence above the fireplace. It was too morbid, he had argued, too cartoonish for such a display, and they had since received many originals of his grandfather's work; but all his arguments were to no avail. The poster stayed.

In his second year of service to the college, he and Clair entertained for the first time, a dinner for his department, and in the weeks before the party, Grimshaw imagined every conceivable horror: the salmon *rémoulade* transformed into Clair's meat loaf, discussion of Carter's domestic policy directed by Clair's views on fast food, or the worst scenario of all—that the colleagues who plotted against one another by day would openly despise one another by night. But by every measurement, the dinner turned out a success. He had not counted on the civilizing effect of flatware or the forgiveness that occurs by candlelight. A vinous haze seemed to bathe everyone present in a glow of courtesy and upright conduct; no one grew belligerent or combative, and at dinner's end there were no injuries—either physical or emotional—to repair. The only question was what to do with Dr. Alfred, the department chair, who had passed out in the living room during after-dinner drinks to the amusement of all except Myra Hendricks, whose shoulder Alfred had used as the most convenient pillow.

"Just turn the lights out, and let the old bastard lie," Myra said, "and pray he don't piss on the sofa." She was struggling to find the lost sleeve of her overcoat, the last residue of her party manners fading by the second.

"He can't drive, certainly," Grimshaw said. Through his open front door he could see the wet street and the older man's ancient Volvo. "We'll get him settled."

"Fine," she said, kissing Clair's impassive cheek. "Be it on your heads."

Together he and Clair draped a blanket around Alfred. A year away from retirement, he had once been an expert on Soviet affairs and Cold War policies, but following his wife's death during a supposedly routine hysterectomy, he had sunk into a torpor from which he had not recovered. His authority on Soviet tendencies had stopped like a broken clock, and he was prone to quote Joe Stalin as a contemporary source even in 1977; in his prime he had been known as a holy terror, an intimidator of callow students and junior faculty alike, but since his intimacy with tragedy he had turned into a pudding.

At first glance Grimshaw thought that he might have had a stroke—his skin was the color of veal, and his jowls were dotted with the blood of a less-than-successful shave—but no, his breathing was regular, his sinuses echoing. He was sleeping the sleep of the wicked, the incompetent, and the overly medicated. Grimshaw folded Alfred's liver-spotted hands underneath the blanket, and then he felt Clair's fingers massaging the back of his neck. Her teeth nibbled the ridge of his ear.

"Bobby." He could not even be sure she had given voice to his name, for her lips had merely moved. She might as well have kissed his inner ear with her tongue; she might as well have unzipped him while wearing feathers and a Merry Widow. So they left Dr. Alfred, leaving as well the dinner dishes and the glasses, but remembering the lights even as they grappled with one another.

What more needs to be said? For doesn't our lovemaking, so earnestly sought after, so anticipated, so eagerly plotted, run much the same course? Clair led her husband to their bedroom by her fingers and her teeth. What they couldn't know was their engagement with farce: that the concussions of their lovemaking would sound to Alfred's wine-addled ear like a fulfillment of the Red Menace—the world was coming to an end after all. He leaped to his feet from the sofa, and in the darkness and his confusion, entangled in the phantom embrace of the blanket, he sent a whole row of crystal wine glasses crashing to the floor even as he yelled out stage directions for the apocalypse: "This is it! Incoming! Here it comes, by God!"

Grimshaw reluctantly left his wife. Alfred stood in the middle of the living room, turning in circles. Grimshaw turned on the lights to survey the damage, then shepherded Alfred to the spare bedroom, giving the older man a pair of his old pajamas and a new toothbrush. The chairman was apologetic and contrite and did as he was told, too abashed to ask questions.

Back in their bedroom, Clair sat on the bench seat of the bay window, looking out into the dark night, looking for all the world like the mermaid of Copenhagen. Her composure was absolute. He would have gone to her, would have gladly resumed their labors, but for a heavy weight of desolation or sadness—like something remembered—that seemed to have flown from her, ballooning now within his own chest. He slipped back into their disheveled bed, the weight slipping away now too, ephemeral, so that he could not be sure it had ever been, and then he was asleep, not waking until late the next morning when he heard the murmur of voices—Clair's flat, uninflected alto, Dr. Alfred's cracked bass.

Clair was pouring coffee, Dr. Alfred eating a piece of toast, while she looked at pictures from his wallet.

"You have a lovely family," she said. "They all have such wonderfully straight backs. And good teeth."

"Yes. That was their mother's doing. Posture and hygiene."

"It is so important," Clair said, "and no one cares anymore, don't you think?"

Suddenly catching sight of Grimshaw in the doorway, Alfred stood. "I must apologize," he said. "Terribly embarrassing."

Grimshaw held up one hand. "No. No need."

"I was in my cups, I'm afraid." He had showered and was dressed once again in his customary attire—gray flannel slacks and a blue oxford-cloth shirt, frayed at the cuffs.

"We all were."

Clair opened the front door to retrieve the morning paper, and a gust of wet air rushed in.

"Your wife," Alfred whispered, "is lovely."

"Yes, I know."

The older man suddenly reached across the table, grabbing Grimshaw's hand in both of his own. "Since my wife died . . ." His hands were trembling, and he did not bother to finish his sentence. "I'm envious, son. God's blessings upon thee."

And then, Grimshaw evidently had not expressed enough agreement, for the old man grasped his hand again, squeezing it much harder than Grimshaw would have thought possible.

"God's blessings," Elfred hissed, "do you hear me?"

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But the years did not spare the Grimshaws any more than they have spared the rest of us. Blessings or no. And if cruel time has stolen our vitality as well as our youth, why should it be different for Grimshaw and his lovely, low-wattage Clair?

He did not last as a professor of American political history—even at an institute with more money than self-respect. Denied tenure after five years, Grimshaw failed to procure another position. His résumé had grown thin and out of date; he was indistinguishable among battalions of Ph.D.'s; he was not so remarkable as he had once imagined. So then he tried his hand first at real estate and then stocks, and except that the market suddenly became bullish in the early eighties, he would not have had any success at all. As it was, he and his clients were wiped out in 1987 in the massacres of October, and then for a time, while his bankruptcy petition was processed, he sold Audis for a man who thought his vocabulary extraordinary and delighted in calling him Doctor Grim. If he had been chained to a wall, he would have rammed his head into it for the sheer pleasure of other pains.

Clair did not seem to be touched by the calamities of her husband's downwardly descending career. And yet, how heartbreaking it is to see what disappoints a simple mind! They were forced to move from the house overlooking Lake Washington to another, even smaller one, and then in the last stages—before they fell upon the mercy of legal protection—to a second-story apartment in an ancient Victorian in a questionable neighborhood. The rain fell in more mean-spirited fashion from clouds that loomed darker with more malevolent intent. Even the evergreens seemed somehow sickly and threatening. Their only child, a daughter named Sophie, was transferred from her exclusive girls' academy to public school midway through her second-grade year, and her inherited stoicism broke her father's heart. Their list of friends grew shorter and more distant with each new decline in their

finances. He began to drink vodka with lunch and pick fights with his oblique-witted wife at dinner. And yet, with each new setback Clair remained singularly impassive, and Grimshaw thought that only two misfortunes had truly disturbed her Panglossian faith: when she discovered that their latest residence did not have a garbage disposal and when the movers tore the Brueghel poster into bits while moving their refrigerator out of the trailer. She had sat down on the outdoor staircase and wept. If Sophie had fallen off the Bremerton ferry and drowned, she could not have been more undone.

He could not have said why he had never looked elsewhere for companionship or romance. For a couple formed in the early seventies, the odds favored either divorce or extramarital dabbling. He knew full well Clair's limitations. He knew also that certain women—a bookkeeper at the Audi dealership, for instance—would not have ignored his attentions. There were many possible reasons: that he was not willing to risk the safety and security of the known, that to hurt Clair by some indiscreet infidelity would have crushed him, that he was afraid of all women smarter and more self-promoting than his wife, that since Sophie's birth his vision of women had been utterly transformed. That some nearly dormant moral impulse made such liaisons unthinkable. All of these were possible, and yet none of them seemed to be altogether true. All he could honestly say was that he was joined to Clair, and at the root of their conjunction was an enigma.

At the nadir of their troubles, they were visited by friends of Clair's family. The Pattersons—a retired plastics manufacturer and his wife—were returning to Ohio from a three-week tour of the Orient. They had found that by staying with missionaries they could travel frugally but in relative American comfort. Grimshaw, although normally opposed to such obvious freeloaders, thought it somehow fitting that their two-bedroom apartment would be the Pattersons' last stop before home. For Clair's sake he welcomed them and brought down the crystal wine goblets—*tokens of a palmier time!*—and asked leading questions about their travels. Inevitably they were as tiresome as they were cheap, and their gift of boring monologue no less intrusive than their habit of imposition. Grimshaw poured glass after glass of

burgundy. He nodded at each of Howard Patterson's assertions that the missionaries in Bangkok were the salt of the earth and knew the best bargains in the open-air markets. And he smiled while Olivia Patterson spoke into Clair's habitually glazed-over stare, using a little-girl voice and the tones of the tourist who, speaking to a Japanese, believes that volume and a distortion of syntax are all that is necessary for understanding.

After dinner, while Clair cleared the dishes and then put Sophie to bed, Howard Patterson took Grimshaw aside. He put a meaty hand on Grimshaw's shoulder, and Grimshaw braced himself for the usual round of condolences about their recent difficulties. Would there be no end to it? Wasn't it enough that he had been bored to death by this philistine. Did he now have to be pitied as well?

"Listen, son, I appreciate all your hospitality, but I have to ask you for one more favor, if I might. I feel bad asking this, but we're old, we've slept in strange beds for twenty nights straight, and Olivia, well, she has a bit of a competence problem, holding it all night, you know, especially when the bed's not up to snuff. I'm looking around your place here, and I know you folks have had your share of problems, but right now I'm thinking we're going to wind up sleeping on some foldout with a bar right in the center of our damn kidneys. Am I right?"

The older man was fidgety, his hands hitching at his belt loops and pockets, and he was obviously pained by the necessity of his request; even so, Grimshaw seriously considered playing ignorant and dumb.

"Do we have a Hide-a-bed? Yes. But what you're really asking is, Would we mind if you slept in our bed and we slept on the couch?"

The plastics manufacturer blew out a long breath. "I hated to ask, son, but there it is. We come here like beggars, and all I can do is ask for more."

The rain that streaked the windows had traveled from the gulf of Alaska; Howard and Olivia Patterson had traveled from the grace of missionaries to be with them here this night.

"We'd be more than happy to switch," Grimshaw said, relishing the sound of the untruth. But the imagined sound of the Hide-a-bed's springs, their musical quality as played by his wife



in her full hostess mode, he relished even more.

"We appreciate it, we really do."

Water dripped from the sagging gables and eaves; the world outside the windows was darkness and chill.

He helped Clair change their bed with fresh sheets while the Pattersons found their nightclothes and toiletries and repacked their luggage. "They're old and they're friends of your family, but they're also rude and pushy and cheap," he whispered while they stripped off the old bedding. "Imagine! Treating missionaries like innkeepers. I'll bet they promised each one of them a donation when they get back home. They probably made a killing on exchange rates and all the stereo equipment they could lug on board. 'We come here like beggars.' What a load of crap."

She shrugged but refused the opportunity to add further fuel to his diatribe. They moved to the living room and bade the Pattersons a good night and sweet dreams, and when the older couple had entered the Grimshaw bedroom, they firmly closed, then locked the bedroom door, the sound of the lock as clearly audible as Olivia Patterson's titter of little-girl laughter.

"Bobby."

He knew how to interpret his name, and before she could lay aside the folded bottom sheet which she was holding, he had bounded across the mattress of their couch to embrace his constant Clair.

"Baby," he breathed into the nape of her fragrant neck. He nibbled one of her perfect ears.

Her response, however, was a disappointment. She stood stock-still, rigid as a pillar. "Listen," she said, her free ear cocked toward their bedroom door.

At first he could hear only the sound of the wind in the eaves, but then quite clearly he heard the rhythmic sounds of his own mattress and box spring.

"'A competence problem.' More crap."

"Bobby," Clair said, "look."

Through the window, the pearly white eye of a full moon gleamed in an opening of the weather. A halo of mist surrounded it. They opened the front door and stood in bare feet on the damp upstairs landing. To the east was a faint rainbow projected of mist and moonshine and thrown onto the screen of a departing cloud.

"Lovely. Beautiful," Grimshaw said to the air. And he remembered the first time he had seen Clair. He had been eating breakfast in a coffee shop on Wilshire and trying to edit a paper on ethical reform within Harding's Cabinet. A rare summer rain was beating against the pavement and sidewalk, and everywhere people were running with briefcases and newspapers overhead while spray shot up from automobile tires and storm drains swallowed the rest.

Out of the corner of his eye, he had seen, without consciously registering their presence, a young woman helping an older man along the sidewalk. Then, a collage and a whirl of color as the young woman went sprawling onto the cement, her blue umbrella cartwheeling into the street and under the wheels of a Buick.

Normally not prompted by the misfortunes of others, Grimshaw had found himself outside in the stinging rain before he understood what he was doing. The transient was already a quarter mile away, Clair's purse flying in the air behind him like a red tail.

"He didn't mean to hurt me," she'd said as he helped her from the ground. "I didn't have any money."

He had steadied her, then dodged between two lanes of cars to rescue her battered umbrella. They were both drenched, and when he returned and saw her flat blue eyes, he had felt gallant and foolish and had trouble getting his breath. Something seemed to have lodged itself against his lungs. "Thank you." She had taken the broken skeleton of her umbrella from him, fumbling with the fractured ribs, the ripped cloth, and then turned to move away.

"Don't go. Come have coffee with me," he had pleaded. "You're soaked."

"Bobby," his wife now said. "Come inside. It's wet."

Inside the living room, the lights had been extinguished, and she was just a voice in the darkness. He felt his way toward the couch, bumping his shin on the metal foldout frame.

"Bobby," Clair breathed, "I'm here."

He dropped his clothes in a pile on the floor, and the springs of the Hide-a-bed squealed when he slid under the sheet and blanket.

"I'm coming to get you," she said. The blanket rose up above them as she made a tent to cover them from all that was outside and inside—folly as well as sin.