



Swimmers

Many times over the past nine months she had fallen asleep in his company, and in her repose, in the slow steadiness of her breathing, he had come to believe in his ability to help her, in her willingness to let him. After all, she had told him, the first time he made her dinner, that she was dogged by sleeplessness. The news of Reese's accident had come in the middle of the night, and since then she was convinced of what she'd suspected all along, that evil lies in wait, that pain and disintegration take us while we're sleeping. The comforts of night, she'd explained, of goose down bedding, of the stars in their constellations—all that evaporates in an instant.

She was asleep now, slouched in the passenger seat, as he drove her car down pot-holed straightaways and around wide, sweeping turns banked by night-blackened walls of cornstalks. The party they had left was the first to which they'd been invited by a single invitation, and that seemed to Hedrick an acknowledgement. He had tiptoed around the edges of courtship—earnest in his caution, delicate in his advances and retreats, patient through the cycles of her mourning—and for once her sleeping didn't lift his spirits but seemed a slight, an insult to his self-restraint, a taking for granted. Before he could talk himself out of it he'd let the car drift toward a pothole. He winced as it caught the front wheel, jolting the car. Carol's head bounced once against the leather headrest. She made a sound, but she did not awaken.

Carol's late husband, Reese O'Malley, had been a business acquaintance. Hedrick had inherited a stake in Christensen Manufacturing, the armaments producer his grandfather had founded at the turn of the century, and Reese was Vice President of Sales for a nearby distributor of imported steel. Once Hedrick sold his stake in the company and retired, he never saw Reese again. He learned of Reese's accident at a show for a ceramist (Hedrick didn't care much for art, but the artist was also a longtime Christensen executive) when the gallery owner made a public announcement about Reese's passing and his irreplaceable patronage.

Hedrick would never have taken Reese, an inflexible if soft-spoken businessman, for an art lover had he not attended a Christmas party at the country house Reese and Carol had moved into one winter. The walls of the living room and hallways, he remembered, were decorated with terse, hostile abstract paintings, sinister, fang-toothed Balinese masks, languid charcoal nudes.

"I knew Reese," Hedrick told the gallery owner. "When did this happen?"

"Oh, a good month ago now," the owner told him. "A sad, sad story," and with that, the owner turned his attention to two women admiring a ceramic and glass heron, its wings spread. That afternoon Hedrick bought a sculpture, a torso and head shielded by medieval knight's armor. Across one side of the helmet was written a pun: A(R)MOUR. It made him think of how Reese's widow must feel, and he sent it with a note of condolence.

She received the sculpture, didn't like it, found it clumsy and obvious, trite, and tried to remember who Hedrick Waller was. She came up with something, a soft, simple face, pleasant enough, a heavy, slow-moving body, a bland if gracious guest who'd been to the house once or twice, years ago. All but indistinguishable from so many others. Days passed. She put off calling him. She'd made dozens of these calls already, mostly to men she remembered no better than Hedrick Waller, and thought she'd never have to make another. She resented the humiliation of perfunctory gratitude, and more than once, on the phone with one of Reese's consoling acquaintances, it occurred to her that everyone must have heard about the girl whose car Reese had been

driving. Some of them might have been introduced to the girl on business trips to Boston. She might have traveled to meet Reese elsewhere, too. Carol wondered, foolishly, if the stranger she was thanking knew more about her husband than she did, and before she could end the call and hang up, she was choking back tears of anger and grief and bewilderment.

For weeks, flowers had filled the house. She saved them all at first: these were people who cared, she told herself, who went out of their way. But soon simply watering them seemed too great an effort, their bright colors painful. She couldn't just throw them away, but she cleared the house of them. As new arrangements arrived she carried them out to the otherwise empty barn. She hid the sculpture there, too. Loaded it into a wheelbarrow and pushed it across the yard. She had opened the barn door to the sweetish, earthy rot of flower stems decomposing in water.

The phone rang three times, then a soft, almost lilting voice, more appropriate for a decorator than a man who built tanks, came on the line, and she knew her memory had conjured the right man. She pictured Hedrick moving slowly for the phone, lifting the receiver with thick, waxy fingers, speaking through pink and delicate lips.

Her voice: the measured singsong of weary tour guides and executives' wives required to make polite conversation. He remembered why he'd left Christensen. She thanked him for the gift and the note, said the outpouring of sympathy was like a balm, she never knew Reese had so many friends. He believed none of it, not in that voice. She said, "But no one else sent art, never mind such a sculpture. It's so heavy," she added. "Forty pounds," he said. "But be careful, it's more delicate than you'd think." And he explained the pun, how he thought the relationship of love and armor might apply to her. He stopped. She sniffed and cleared her throat. Was she stifling tears? He'd been wrong to doubt her sincerity. He told her he understood, that this must be a very difficult time, did she have family, someone she could trust to look after her? He tried to find something else to say, something less platitudinal, but went blank. Was it the sculpture that made her weep? Was it as poignant as he had thought? She cleared her throat again, apologized, said he must have things to get back to. He said he remembered the farmhouse, though he had only been there once, and that its neighborless acres and glass-smooth pond had something to do with his selling out of Christensen. He told her of the lakeside house he lived in now, how it was not quite what he'd imagined but he couldn't rightly ask for more. She said he must have things to get back to. He was afraid she would hang up and dissolve into grief. And he found rising within him a loneliness, a dark molten liquid spreading beneath his skin, that he was sure matched her own. He said he didn't have much to keep him busy, he had time on his hands, and if it was all right with her, he'd like to stop by sometime, see how was she was doing, visit the house again.

He was out on one of his drives, his lazy back road idles, and kept recognizing the ways to her house. *Why not?* he decided. If she greeted him coldly, he'd understand. After all, that's what the sculpture was about. Still, he found himself admiring the property long enough that she had to invite him in. He found that the house was darker and more cluttered than he remembered, that the art was Carol's interest, not Reese's, that her tastes ran dark and primitive: African masks, Zapotec funerary urns, wasted Giacometti-like statues. He did not see the sculpture he'd sent her.

They came out of the cornfields. Soft hills peeled back from the road. The night sky was sleepy with overcast, the moon blinking through. In the distance, like two wide-awake eyes, shone hazy gold light: the vigilant second story windows of Carol's house. Especially at night,

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surrounded by the dark, wave-like fields, the house looked to him like a ship, a great, tireless hull parting water.

He thought of lifting his hand from the gearshift and taking hers, which lay folded in her lap, but the habits of restraint and withdrawal were too strong, and instead he glanced at her sleeping face drained of animation. Her sleep mask, he thought, comparing it to the unguarded blankness of the Dan funeral mask that hung on her reading room wall. He turned off the road, gravel crunched under the tires. Carol stirred, was awakening. She opened her eyes. "We're home," she said, blinking.

"Yes," he said. "We're home." He shut off the car.

"Thanks for driving," she said. She wiped an eye. "I'm bushed."

Hands in pockets, he followed her up the walkway: the closing ritual of their occasional nights out. "Oh," she said. "My keys." He held them out to her. She took them, leaned in, kissed his cheek. "Thank you again."

He said, "You know, I'm awfully tired too." He imagined how her hand would feel in his, then saw himself take it, saw Carol blink awake in the passenger seat, saw her recoil, withdrawing her slender hand from his unwieldy one. He shrugged, said, "I could use a cup of coffee."

She inserted the key, unlocked the door, turned to face him. "Well," she said, considering. "But I'll leave you to your own devices. You know where everything is. Is that all right?"

He put the kettle on the stove, imagined telling her the truth—speaking boldly and honestly and facing whatever came of it—but went ahead with the pretense. He spooned instant into a mug. Above him, Carol's nighttime sounds—muted footsteps, a closet door closing, water running through pipes in the walls. She came downstairs in a white flannel nightgown, stood at the threshold across the dining room, called out goodnight.

"Are you sure you don't want some tea," he said. "I've got water on."

"No thank you, Hedrick."

"It might help you sleep."

The kettle whistled. He didn't move. He should just tell her. He felt the awful, solicitous smile straining his face. How long had it been there?

She said, "You better get that kettle."

She had met Reese in college. He was the well-built, ruddy-faced engineering student in her painting class. A high school wrestler, he was agile without being graceful. His brushstrokes were short and blocky, his canvases flat still lifes; brightly colored, sunny and hopeful, a dilettante's imitation of Matisse. A semester later he showed up in her class on the history of German art. Leaving the midterm exam he looked drained, exasperated. "Didn't go well?" she asked. He said he wanted to be "cultured," "learned," that college was "not vocational school," so he was minoring in art, but it turned out he had no feel for it. She saw his fist was clenched, such a baldly masculine show of frustration it would have been comic had he not been so endearingly disappointed in himself. She offered to tutor him, was impressed by his commitment, charmed by his self-deprecation, gratified by his attention to her lessons on Dürer and Grunewald and Grosz. She confessed to him her secret, that she'd been admitted to the Art Institute of Chicago but had developed cold feet: she was afraid of becoming a girl who wore nothing but black, who walked with her head down, who rejected every wholesome feature of her childhood. And she was aware even as she said this, in the sweet, still moments between kisses and hands too resigned to the habit of propriety, that she loved him for the image of herself he allowed her: one part expert in the dark, ethereal reaches of the soul, one part sunny Shaker Heights girl, her father's favorite, a *Life* magazine American. Falling in love, she suspected, is about who we are prepared to become.

And she became. Holiday parties for Reese's business associates; weekend trips to New York galleries, museum shows, lectures. A country house she and Reese had renovated as her father had done second homes in Ohio; a painting studio added on to pine-shaded back. They gardened, bought horses, tried for children, and she'd had two affairs of her own—she reminded herself of this: one with an Italian professor of literature at NYU, the other a New York architect-turned-painter. She returned from those weekends in the city to find Reese absorbed in trade journal articles and retired to her studio. She painted to blaring Rachmaninov, its minor keys making her think of dark water, of long winter dusks, and she imagined Reese in the lamp-lit living room, his silence and thinning blonde hair, a ghost flitting at the edges of her life. She felt wracked and befriended by guilt, took her turmoil to the canvas, threw herself into the Rachmaninov—*This is my music*: dissonant strings folding back on themselves, building to shimmering, ominous heights.

Until she thought again of Reese, that right now he'd be dressing in fresh pajamas, brushing his teeth, and suddenly the music frightened her. Outside, wind gusts, wilderness sounds. The black pine trees listed. The house was a ship sailing seas of dark water. She was terrified of life beyond the railing, its dark oceanic depths, fathomless. A force bent on corrupting what was clean within her.

He sat at the kitchen table while the coffee cooled and then dumped it in the sink. Then he drove his own car home, scolding himself. It would be a long time before she was ready, if she was ever ready. In the meantime, she did not need a suitor disguised as a friend. He hated himself for steering into the pothole, was relieved that he had not reached for her hand. Ahead, moonlight reflecting off the lake, the dark windbreaking row of oak trees that shaded his house. There came the warm liquid spread of loneliness and self-pity. Inside, he poured orange juice and drank it down with a sleeping pill. A week before they had eaten seared ahi on her back patio, the evening sunlight golden and generous, and she had talked of her childhood, how growing up Christian Scientist taught one deceit. Parents, in the name of purity and faith, hid from their children things that could literally save them. She was still proud, she said, of her most flagrant act of rebellion. On weekends home from college she had taken her sister for polio vaccination shots. And yet devotion gave her parents a confidence, a moral assurance built on personal responsibility and self-reliance, that she loved and envied and never wanted to see compromised.

Though he felt a twinge of regret for the ways he himself had deceived her—he thought of the phone call he'd taken months ago while watching her house (he'd known even as he set the receiver back in its cradle he would never tell her about it)—he was made hopeful when no cloud of introspection crossed her face. Always, whenever she talked of the past, she fell into silence and her features darkened and the next words were invariably about Reese. But not this time. He seized the moment. He told her a story of his own, about how as a child he'd gone with his father and grandfather to the Christensen factory and watched a parade of newly built tanks roll off the line. His grandfather must have read his expression because he had said, "Don't get dreamy. There's no romance to this. It's a business and someday you'll run it." Hedrick shrugged, spread his arms as if to say, *Oh well*, as if to say, *We are kin in our gentle rebellions*, and Carol smiled and raised her glass. Hedrick sipped and was lost for a moment in the memory of being soft and out of place in a world of military precision. He set down his glass and added that when he thought of his grandfather, and of his father, too, that that was the image that came to mind: a single file of shiny new tanks, evenly spaced as if in formation, rolling out the factory doors.

Later that night he put on Mozart and set out a sleeping pill and told her it was okay if she wanted to go on to bed while he cleaned up the dishes, wrapped the leftovers, but she

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replaced the Mozart with Aretha Franklin and stayed to help him. She brought in dishes and he rinsed them and set them in the dishwasher. She wrapped the leftover risotto, singing along to “See Saw.” Her face was flushed with sun. The wine had made her buoyant and a little tipsy, and after the record played a second time she fell asleep with her head in his lap. He sat for a while as she snored, not wanting to disturb her, and finally he let himself touch her hair. He spent what must have been an hour with his hands running lightly through it, until he, too, had nodded off to sleep.

That was a week ago. He slipped off his trousers and caught sight of himself, in profile, in the floor-length mirror. He faced himself. The mottled whiteness of his legs. His thighs looked enormous. His calves, black socks pulled tight until the nut of muscle, looked a little better, but he went to bed with his shirt on rather than suffer the humiliation of seeing himself without it. And his bed felt suddenly smaller, as if he had expanded over the course of his waking hours. An old bitterness seized him—the fat boy’s rage against himself—and with it his schoolboy fantasy of maiming his enemies with explosives stolen from Christensen. But the fantasy dissolved almost as soon as it had come to him. He no longer had the energy for such anger. He fluffed his pillow, glanced at the clock, bid the effects of the sleeping pill to hurry along.

The girl who’d been with him, whose car it was.

Reese’s accident under a heavy August moon. September, the barn filled with rotting flowers. October surprised with early snow. She watched the strange sight of chimney smoke riding downdrafts past the living room window. She woke three straight nights to the sound of cars striking deer. And she thought as much about the girl as she did Reese. Their funerals had been held the same day, the girl’s in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and Carol felt robbed of her rightful place. She thought, *I’m the one who’s supposed to be buried with him*. She called the newspaper in Wellesley, had them send a week’s editions, and flipped through stories about weddings and covered bridge repairs and a professor’s trip to Ghana, until she found the girl’s obituary. She learned the girl’s name was Laura White and that she had been twenty-six and blonde (in the photograph her hair was held back from her face by the kind of band Carol had worn in college). Laura had lived with her parents not five miles from the all girls’ college she’d attended. She had played fourth violin in the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Her parents had bought her the convertible Reese was driving. A daddy’s girl, Carol thought. Sheltered, virginal. A girls’ school, for God’s sake. What could Reese have possibly wanted with her?

She tried to imagine what Laura and Reese might have done together, the things they’d talked about, but in her mind’s eye the car simply veered out of control, rolled down an embankment, collided with a tree.

By November, Hedrick’s was a persistent presence. He called every second or third day, came over if he didn’t like the sound of her voice. She never invited him, in fact she braced against the thought of his unannounced arrival, but she was almost always relieved when his car appeared in the driveway. She watched him climb out of the driver’s seat and the sun seemed suddenly brighter, the brown, leafless world awake in its glare. His heft, his slow moving body a counterbalance to her abstraction, her gloom. He would have driven all the way to Scranton to pick up sushi, to buy ingredients for the cilantro salad he’d fix, the pistachio-crust lamb. He shared his prescription of sleeping pills.

He sent her upstairs while he cleaned after dinner, played a Mozart duo while loading the dishwasher, and from her bedroom she sought comfort in household sounds, in the blithe symmetry of the allegro, and waited for the pill to knock her out. These were the only nights she slept. . . .

But she woke to find the night's gratitude had evaporated. She emptied the dishwasher with scorn for Hedrick's attention—*Have you nothing better to do with yourself?* She willed him not to come back, tensed at the thought of his car coming slowly up the gravel driveway. It was the same with her sister on the phone. The ring at 4:30 sharp, and Carol sighed with disgust. Valerie had always been willing to consider herself unremarkable, plain, because her station in the social hierarchy seemed to demand it, and so she had always offered herself as confidant to more intrepid peers, a sympathetic voice for those who had flown too high and fallen. "How are you, Carol?" her voice plaintive and supportive, both. *All those years of practice.* Valerie would never have had the guts to take herself for polio shots. "I'm feeling fine. I'm feeling, I'm feeling just fine."

"I'm so relieved you have Hedrick to look after you."

Her mother inspired a different kind of resentment. Her voice was laced with belief in the grand design. It demanded conviction and fortitude. To her, Carol complained, "I hurt. And I'm bitter. Why shouldn't I be bitter?" And she explained her ambivalence about Hedrick's attention. "I am fond of him," she said, "and most of the time he is a big help. But I'm sure he's hoping for something more." She heard a regretful note in her own voice. She had caught herself trying to imply that she had slept with him, carelessly, indulgently, in pursuit of a temporary succor. An old habit, this: testing her mother's propriety, her faith in the prescribed order of things.

"That's a problem," her mother said.

"I feel like an awful person. I'm bad to Hedrick and I was bad to Reese."

"How were you ever bad to Reese?"

"I don't know," she said. She thought to confess her weekends in New York but backed away. "I'm just sure that I was."

Hedrick was not the first to suggest a vacation, but the way he said it, his hand heavy and earnest on her shoulder, and she thought it a way to evade his good intentions for a while without having to lose them altogether. But the obvious options seemed miserable, pathetic—the *newly widowed on a Florida beach*. Then on the first warmish day in March she suffered a sentimental longing for her childhood room (she thought of it as a mini-stroke) and decided on a morning's whim to visit her mother in the old brick house she'd grown up in. The temperature dropped again, crusting the snow with an icy glaze, but she was already committed. She drove across Pennsylvania, through bleak late winter landscapes, past dreary coal towns, twilit mills. The sky was continually overcast. She listened to Beethoven, Stravinsky, Bach's suites for unaccompanied cello. She imagined losing control, the car rolling down the embankment, the fatal impact against a tree. Halfway to Cleveland she checked into a roadside motel under the name (*Why am I doing this?*) Laura White.

He collected the mail and newspapers, watered the houseplants. He could not find the sculpture he'd sent her, though there were places he would not allow himself to look. Besides, he was more interested in her art. He studied her Guro statues and the Ryah rugs hanging on the walls. He found himself invigorated and grateful for having been introduced to something new and resolved to buy a book on art so he could discuss these things with Carol. He would make other changes, too. He would capitalize on this surge of high spiritedness. Each morning, he decided, would begin with a walk around the lake, no matter how cold the temperature, and he committed himself to dieting. The answering machine clicked on—Carol was checking her messages from Ohio. She'd been gone six days but hadn't yet called him.

The next day he answered the phone when it rang. It was Carol, sounding shocked that Hedrick had answered. "Well, I was here," he said, "and I thought it might be good for some peo-

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ple to know the house is being looked after. You never know who might be up to what.” He hadn’t thought of it before, but claiming himself guard of her property gave him a pleasing feeling of dominion, a satisfaction in his own usefulness.

He asked after her visit, tried to sound both concerned and hopeful. She said she was alternately thankful and irritated. Her mother was sensitive to her but not overly so. Her mother was stolid, trustworthy, reliable, so much so that in her company Carol often felt like a guilty child. Meanwhile, Valerie was driving her mad. “She’s always reminding me that if I ever want to *slip away* and *let it all out* that she’s *there for me*. Oh, and it’s always, ‘Can I help you with that?’ This morning I was carrying two glasses of grapefruit juice into the dining room—one for me and one for Mother—and Valerie said, Can I help you with that? I said, Really, Val—I couldn’t help myself—I said, They’re not as heavy as they look.” She said she felt constricted by her sister’s ignorance. That was the word she used—*ignorance*. Ignorant of what, Hedrick wondered, but he didn’t ask. He was afraid he had heard a slyly delivered rebuke of himself, and then her tone changed; she sounded fatigued, deflated. “Well,” she said. “You must have things to get back to,” as if she’d forgotten he was in her house. “I was calling to leave you a message. There’s one at your house, too. I just wanted to know if everything was okay, and I guess it is.”

“Take care of yourself,” he said before they hung up.

A three-day spike in temperature brought a sudden thaw, and he saved several framed paintings from water leaking into the basement. First he laid them across sawhorses, and then, curious, brought one upstairs to the light. It was one of the violent abstract oils he remembered from the years-ago Christmas party. Textured black and red, it was visceral, discomfiting. “Apocalyptic,” he thought, pleased to have found a word to describe it. Had she taken it down after Reese’s accident? He could understand that. What he could not understand was liking it in the first place. He lifted it, planning to carry it back down the basement, when he noticed the signature, a slant-lettered *Carol Holtzman* in cool, steely blue. *Holtzman*. It sent him to the kitchen, to the refrigerator door, where it was printed above the number where she could be reached in Ohio.

She and her mother shopped at the mall for a shower gift. Lisa Earl, the first child of an old neighborhood girl to get married, would be the first to marry twice. Her mother’s impulse was to shop in the lingerie store, but Carol talked her out of it, claiming a slinky negligé didn’t seem right for a second marriage. They decided to browse a department store at the far end of the mall, but Carol wouldn’t let the subject go. Something lacey and sheer, she pushed on. She’d somehow conjured an image of Laura White in a silk teddy, her hair held back by a tortoise shell band. She was feeling suddenly malignant. For a younger bride, she said, crossing for the first time into a kind of adulthood that would finally quash anything resembling desire—that’s when such a gift made sense. Might as well dress up while you still felt the urge. “Or for an affair,” she added. “Why don’t we throw showers for affairs?” She felt her mother’s irritation, saw her face clamp closed with disapproval, locked against malevolent ideas, and Carol felt the old guilty thrill she’d always gained from suggesting that deep down she was really a black sheep. *Black sheep*: she turned the words over, resenting that they had never really applied to her—her grades had always been too good, she’d always pulled back from the most daring risks, always made sure she wasn’t caught. She remembered the professor’s East Village apartment, the cockroach that crawled across the kitchen counter as she was leaving one morning to return to Reese and the farm house. She had thought then, *How have I ever seemed my parents’ daughter?* “For affairs,” she said, timorous and yet riding the crest of momentum, as if in the headlong into confession. “I mean, they’re the last vestige of old time romance.”

"Stop it now, Carol," her mother said. "That's enough," and Carol flushed with terrible delight.

They considered cookware, a set of beeswax candles, sterling silver picture frames. The shameful pleasure lasted, shuttling her back and forth between secret indulgence and guilty solicitousness. On a tidal surge of shame she insisted her mother let her buy them chocolate milkshakes before they drove home. As they sipped, she complimented her mother's gift selections, asked after her mother's friends. Her mother said, "You're ashamed of your little outburst, aren't you." Carol nodded, wiped a drop of milkshake from her lip, lowered her head to sip through her straw, and then leaving the ice cream shop, stepping back into the mall's noisy, florescent-lit corridors, she saw him—up ahead, still stoop-shouldered and blade thin and tall as a doorframe. He wore pin-striped suit pants and a worn brown leather jacket. His hair was gray and close-cropped, shorn of his youthful curls, and she watched him a moment, his face shrouded by private thoughts, going about his business as if he weren't a giraffe in a forest of hedgehogs, before he raised his head and saw her. The smile was the same, closed-lipped and tilting at an angle across his face, punctuated by narrowed, mischievous eyes. "Carol Holtzman," he said. "Well, I'll be god-damned."

He came and embraced her. She caught herself checking for a glint of gold on his left hand, but he slipped it back into his pocket before she could see.

"Mother, you remember Danny Rinaldi."

Her mother studied his face, shook her head. "No, actually, the name doesn't ring a bell."

"But of course of you do—"

Danny extended his hand for Carol's mother to shake. He said, "Actually, Carol, I don't think we were ever introduced," and Carol felt the blush spread across her face.

The phone rang, and instinctively he moved for it, then stopped himself. He checked his eagerness, wiped his palms on his pant legs, waited for the third ring. "May I speak with Carol O'Malley, please."

Carol had called twice so far, at exactly this hour. The second time he'd let the machine pick up, not wanting her to know how much time he was spending in her house. But this time he wanted to tell her of the paintings he'd saved.

"I'm afraid she's not at home. She's out of town until Friday, and I'm watching the house."

"My name is Elizabeth White. I'm the mother of Laura White."

"Yes?"

"The girl who . . . Reese O'Malley was driving my daughter's car. He was driving it when he was killed."

Dutifully, he took down the number. When Elizabeth White explained that she was by no means calling to punish Mrs. O'Malley, nothing like that, she had simply come to understand that she and Mrs. O'Malley had something in common and they might both benefit from a conversation, Hedrick answered, "Yes, I'm sure Mrs. O'Malley would appreciate that." But he never for an instant considered telling Carol about the call. Why on earth would she want to talk with the mother of her late husband's mistress? My God, the girl who had been killed with him. The call left him unsettled. *Why would Elizabeth White ever think . . . ? Benefit?* He folded the note he'd written and tucked it in his shirt pocket. He finished watering the plants, double-checked the thermostat, locked up the house. He considered staying a while longer, waiting to see if Carol would call, but he decided he shouldn't talk to her in this troubled state of mind—she would wonder why he was acting strangely, and then what would he tell her?—so he drove toward home. The roadside fields of corn stubble were still and flooded. A wintry sky was moving in,

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but there was no wind; tall, leafless trees, black against the sky, stood unmoving. The basement paintings came to mind, the molten black and red, the muted violence of them: they took darkness as a fact of life. And they expressed perfectly the mood the phone call had put him in. If the call had disturbed him so deeply, he thought, what might it do to Carol? He knew she might consider it bad manners, but he wished for her an impervious wall shielding her safely from *all that*. He had been doing his best to maintain such a wall, and he would not knowingly permit it to fissure.

He crested a hill, and there below was the lake, the shadowy woods encircling it, his house hidden among trees and doubled grayly in water's shallow edge. The paved road ended and he saw that his house was dark, the windows unlit and framing reflections of the stark landscape, the winter sky above. This was not where he wanted to be. In his head he counted his remaining sleeping pills, but when he reached the driveway he turned the car around. Where could he go? He could drive himself into Scranton for supper at Leonardo's. He could drop by the Dalton Inn and hope that someone he knew was in the mood for conversation and a beer or two. But he decided he didn't feel like company—for one thing, he was afraid Elizabeth White's call would push itself to his lips—so he drove himself to the mall, where he would watch whatever was playing at the movie theater.

She had run into Danny Tuesday afternoon, she would be leaving Friday morning, so they made tentative plans to have a drink Wednesday night. "I have a commitment," Danny said through his crooked smile, "but I'm sure I can break it. I'll call you." Later that night Valerie came by with a rented movie, and Carol's mother invited Mr. Aaronsohn, who had lived three houses down since Carol and Valerie were children and whose wife had died ten years earlier. A bond of loneliness, Carol thought of her mother and Mr. Aaronsohn. Of resignation. Widow and widower and their occasional gentle evenings. A bitter self-disgust rose up: this was what she feared becoming. It was what she resented so angrily those mornings after Hedrick had fixed dinner, sent her off to bed with a pill, stayed to clean up while she dozed off.

Mr. Aaronsohn had suffered a recent stroke, and now the right side of his face was drooped and immobile. He had a habit of petting it lightly with his fingertips, as if testing to see if the feeling had come back. Carol greeted him with a hug, let him loop his arm through hers, asked after him and his daughters, but she was quickly at the limits of her hospitality, and before the movie started she was inhabited by a restlessness that kept her from concentrating on the characters and plot. What she wanted so impatiently was to be alone—an impish adolescent's urge to go upstairs and close the door of her room and will the voices she heard to cease, the house to suddenly empty.

Halfway into the movie Valerie excused herself to go to the bathroom, and her mother paused the tape and switched on a lamp. She offered to make tea but found no takers. "Carol," Mr. Aaronsohn said, "are you painting?" and Carol tensed against one of those instructive if sympathetic conversations, the long-widowed to the newly.

"Not yet," Carol said. "Sometimes I get everything out and sit in my studio, but I don't like what comes into my head."

"Well, don't waste any more time," Mr. Aaronsohn said. "It's what I miss most. Since this." He ran his fingers down the length of his cheek, and Carol was relieved: this wasn't a conveying of pity but an expression of disappointment and rue.

"The trumpet," Carol said. "I remember your trumpet-playing."

"The *only* thing I miss," said Mr. Aaronsohn. "My one regret. Should have spent more time on that and less on everything else."

"You're right," Carol said as Valerie returned with a glass of milk and a chocolate chip cookie, saying with her mouth full, "I'm ready when you are."

Carol said, "I paint to music, certain music, and I brought some of my favorite pieces for the drive. I was secretly hoping to be visited by motivation. But I know you're right, you can't wait, you have to do. It's hard, though."

"You're not rushing her, are you?" Valerie said to her mother, to Mr. Aaronsohn. "She's had a lot to deal with, she needs time." Carol groaned aloud. The vexation she felt at that moment was sharp, exaggerated. Valerie put a hand on Carol's knee, said, "I'd like to meet Hedrick someday."

"Carol has a good friend looking out for her," her mother explained to Mr. Aaronsohn.

"You and Hedrick would get along," Carol said to Valerie, sharply. She meant that the weight of Valerie's hand on her knee reminded her of those mornings she spurned Hedrick's protective and possessive concern. She managed to keep the word *spinster* from slithering out her mouth but thought, *Go get yourself laid*, and she crossed her legs so that Valerie's hand fell away. But when Valerie asked, "Have you called that therapist your friend recommended?" she snapped. "It was that other girl," she said. "It wasn't me who died," and she excused herself shortly after they restarted the movie. As she left, she heard her mother apologizing to Mr. Aaronsohn, explaining that Carol had been agitated and poorly behaved all day long.

She climbed the stairs, closed the door to her room. She left the light off and lay down and thought she probably wouldn't feel so restless if she had not run into Danny Rinaldi. What she was wanting now was to slip through the dark, quiet house and hurry the three blocks to Governor Street, where Danny sat waiting in his car, smoking cigarettes, his head of soft curls backlit by a streetlamp. Her seventeenth summer she often kissed her parents goodnight just minutes after dark, then waited in bed, fully dressed, for the last voice to quiet, when she made in stockinged feet, a pair of sneakers in one hand, down the stairs and through the kitchen and out the front door. She'd kept the rendezvous secret, telling no one, not even her closest friends. First because she was between what she considered legitimate boyfriends and knew that Danny, who spent his evenings working on his car (*What kind was it?*) and his motorcycles, who was smart but not "college material" (even now she heard the phrase in her father's voice), whose father worked in a steel mill and wore a metal gray smock with his name, *Dan Sr.*, stitched over his breast pocket, would be met with sweeping disapproval. But soon she kept the secret for its own sake, and by August she was taking more flagrant risks, testing her parents' trust of her. She kissed her parents goodnight, lay in bed for an hour, and then, as her father was switching off the downstairs lights, came back down, her skirt and blouse wrinkled (conspicuously, she hoped). "Can't sleep?" her father asked. "I'm going out for a walk," Carol answered. "That's three late night walks this week," her father said. "They help me sleep." And rather than have Danny drop her off a block from home (his car was so loud it could be heard from a distance much greater than a block) she told him to park in front of the house. He kept the engine running—the deep rhythmic chug, louder by far than the early morning garbage trucks—and as he slipped his hand back up her skirt she kept a half-closed eye on her parents' bedroom window, hoping to see a light come on, but one never did. If she'd been caught, she thought now, then they would know something about who she really was.

And her thoughts turned instantly to Reese. Reese *had* been caught. A girl twenty-six years old, who had gone to an all girls' school not five miles from her parents. Had he been playing Danny Rinaldi to Laura's Carol? Had his thrill been in tempting her out of her cloister? Carol had once thought she played that role for Reese, leading him into Dürer and Grunewald, those monstrosities of suffering which had struck her as thrilling and honest. But at some point he must have decided he'd gone too far, that this world she'd shown him was not hospitable to the

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likes of him, and returned to a more comfortable, better ordered place, leaving her to her New York affairs and her painting studio and her Rachmaninov.

Certainly Laura might have thought Reese a dark and daring secret—a married man, so much older, in and out of town and having to keep their affair clandestine. If Carol understood anything at all about the girl—she had let Reese drive, after all; in some way she had given herself over to him—then she understood this. But Reese, Carol was sure of it, did not think himself Danny Rinaldi. He did not think himself a corrupter of innocence. She thought again of the picture that ran with Laura's obituary, the dark crewneck sweater, the band holding back her hair. No. He was drawn to what Carol had tried to be, to what she had once seemed, what she could no longer sustain in any convincing way. Carol had imposed her Rachmaninov paintings on their den and dining room and bedroom, she had failed to become the woman Reese had seen in the girl, and Reese started over, seeking out a chaste-looking girl inclined toward the artistic but who was, in the end, perfectly comfortable under her parents' roof.

Carol woke in the middle of the night. A dream of dark seas, the bed tossing like an unworthy vessel. The picture she'd conjured earlier in the day returned to her: Laura in a silk teddy. She saw Reese's hand cupping the girl's breast. It was true: Reese had started over, and Carol despaired, she wept. Rachmaninov's strings rose and fell with tidal intensity, frightening her, and she got out of bed, went downstairs to the living room phone. She switched on the lamp and started dialing Hedrick's number, confounded by the impulse, shocked to admit she might need him after all, but stopped—*It must be three in the morning*. Instead, she dialed her own number, as if Hedrick might be at her house. The phone rang four times, and then her own voice came on the line: the greeting she'd made a month after Reese had passed (*You have reached the home of Carol O'Malley. . .*): its attempt at a normal measure of hopefulness unconvincing; as arid as the scratching of an invisible tree branch against the dark living room window.

He woke in the shirt he'd worn the night before. He remembered steering into the pothole, his tortured wish for strength enough to lay his feelings on the line, his humiliation at his pale and vein-spotted legs, but the self-loathing that had come to bed with him seemed unreal, part of a dream he'd dreamt weeks ago. This morning held out abounding energy and wholly irrational joy. His reflection in the bedroom mirror—chest like a rowboat's hull, legs as resolute as tree trunks—suggested dependability, not gluttony. A sinking ship that tied to him would be saved. Over coffee he tried to reason through his good feeling but found no source beyond the clear, bright day that shone through the kitchen window, the sun glancing off the lake. He was glad he'd quit Christensen when he had. He loved his house anew. As for Carol, he would call her in a couple of hours and check on her, confident that he could be a true and reliable friend. Now, in daylight, it was easy to dismiss what had troubled him the night before. He thought, *How perfectly elastic is the human heart!*

He took himself for a drive, browsed the Fleetville antique stores. When he returned home the phone was ringing: Carol. She said, "If you're not too busy, I'd like to stop by a little later." A strange request, he thought. She didn't call him often, and he didn't remember her ever asking to come over. But her tone was neither anxious nor vulnerable. In fact it gave nothing away. He thought to ask what was on her mind but said simply, "No, of course, come by whenever you'd like. I'll be around all day."

The afternoon heat grew sticky and oppressive, the sun a smudge of glare behind velvety overcast. He dragged the hose around the side of the house, watered the vegetable garden, let a cool stream of water pour over his head and down the inside of his shirt. He put on his sun hat, collected ripe berries from the lakeside bushes, clipped a bouquet of day lilies. And all the while

he kept an eye on the driveway. Hours passed without sight of Carol. She had asked to come over and then not showed. He replayed her call in his head, tried to recreate her voice. Had he missed something? A pensive note? An agitated one? Angry? Had he done something he should regret? Maybe last night he'd crossed a line. He worried, and the morning's good feeling drained away. High up on a ladder, scraping moss off the roof of the shed, he lost his confidence altogether. He felt the rungs weaken beneath him. He imagined falling through, one rung at a time, breaking his legs, lying fat and crumpled and in agony when Carol arrived. He tried to recall the morning's elation. When the clouds thinned and a ghostly half-moon appeared, rising from the wooded hillside across the lake, he stopped what he was doing and willed himself to marvel at a world of perfect beauty. But his effort was insincere and left him feeling worse.

It was dusk when Carol finally arrived. From his living room windows the moon was high now and brightening behind the film of clouds. The distant trees were black and indistinct. He heard her car on the gravel and went outside to greet her. She was wearing a tan linen dress spotted in the back with damp amoebas of sweat.

"I've made some fresh lemonade," he said.

"No thank you, Hedrick." Her eyes fixed on his, her mouth bent in a small frown.

"You look like you have something on your mind."

When he showed his straining, nervous smile she winced with pity. But he wasn't helpless, he wasn't a child, he should have known better. Still, she searched for a gentle avenue into what she wanted to say. When none presented itself, she started to suggest they go on in and sit down, but Hedrick preempted her. He said, "Would you like to take a walk? I have a good route. I told you I've been walking in the mornings."

"Yes, you did."

"Well, not every morning, but a couple times a week. I'm not sure how long it takes, I never timed it."

They started along the waterside path, cutting through woods abuzz with insects and then across a sloping yard. At the house atop it, an older couple sat on the porch. Hedrick waved, the neighbors each raised a hand in reply, and then the path led into woods that grew dark and damp and mosquitoed. Hedrick searched his mind for something to say. Carol's tone, her obvious impatience with him, had brought back last night's bad feeling. But no words came to him. When he stepped across a narrow creek and reached back, Carol took his hand, lifted her skirt, leapt across, but she stepped past him and down the path without so much as a glancing acknowledgement. Her back to him she said, "I know you've never been married, so it would be hard for you. But if you were married, and if your wife had been killed, what would you do? Have you thought about that? How would you react? What would you think about, what would you want to know?"

He drew alongside her, caught his breath, said, "I *have* thought about that. I mean, of course I can't know exactly what you feel, but I have thought about it. I've put myself in your shoes, as best I can anyway. That's what the sculpture was about." She gave him a squinted, quizzical look. He said, "The suit of armor with the pun on the helmet."

"Right. Of course."

The path narrowed between blackberry bushes. He held the first thorny canes back for Carol and then turned sidewise to pass through, but the thorns stuck him anyway. He untangled himself carefully, one barb at a time, and hurried to catch her. "This walk is pretty," he tried, coming up behind her and short of breath. "Makes me glad I live here."

She could almost feel his approach, and his voice struck her as too loud, as if he were speaking directly into her ear. She had to suppress a rising irritation, a desire to turn around and scold him, before she said, "So how do you think you'd react? What exactly did you think about?"

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I want to know.”

“Well, I think I’d feel lonely and confused. And maybe like the world was all out of whack.”

“Is there more?”

“Where is this going, Carol?”

“I talked to the girl’s mother this morning. She called me.”

“Oh.”

“You know, you don’t really know very much about me. You don’t. Do you know that I have a copy of the girl’s obituary? I had her hometown paper send the edition and I cut it out. It’s in the drawer by my bed.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I’m sure I didn’t.”

He saw her suck in her lips, falling deep into thought, and her pace picked up. In a moment she was several steps ahead of him, her head bent forward, the sweat stains between her shoulder blades expanding. He was afraid to interrupt her and followed sheepish and silent. Soon they reached a clearing. There, a rowboat was tied to a dock. Carol stopped to watch it drift this way and that on the breeze, and Hedrick stopped a couple of yards behind. A terrible memory flashed up—one involving a rowboat and children laughing at his expense. He blinked the image away, but the feeling of it remained. They were almost directly across the lake from his house. Despite his claim otherwise, Hedrick had not walked this path more than a couple of times all summer, and he hadn’t once stopped to consider his house from this angle. He thought for a moment but didn’t remember seeing it from this side of the lake since he’d first come with the realtor. And seeing it now, through the shame of Carol’s irritation, and through the dispiriting humiliation of the memory he was trying to keep out of mind, he was struck by the strangeness of this place he lived in. The floor to ceiling windows, running ten feet by six across the living room, seemed from here a point of weakness, a breach that reduced a seemingly reliable fortress to a sorrowful joke. From inside, with its views of the lake and woods and rising moon, the windows were the house’s great feature, and he’d spent many hours gazing through them and onto a world framed into splendid compositions. The views rewarded him with a pleasing feeling of sovereignty, as if the world he beheld had been made for his pleasure alone. But standing outside looking in gave the lie to that feeling. The evening light was deepening, and under the lamps burning bright in his living room he saw perfectly the matching off-white sofa and chair, and above the sofa the oil rendition of the view from his living room, a painting that, in light of the art Carol collected, now seemed to him simplistic, naïve, romantically self-indulgent. And then he saw himself coming from the dining room to stand huge and naked and smugly satisfied behind those windows, foolishly thinking the life he led was one of charm and dignity.

“She said she talked to you,” Carol said. “The girl’s mother. Months ago. She said she talked to someone who answered my phone, and that could only be you. Right?”

“Yes,” Hedrick said, “I talked to her.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Carol, that call—I wrote down the woman’s number, I wrote you a note about it, but—But it just made me feel so bad—horrible, depressed. After all you’d been through, and you were so vulnerable and it made me feel—”

“Hedrick, listen.” She sounded more serious than he’d ever heard her. She shook her head, said slowly, “I’m—not—like—you.”

There. It hadn’t come out as she’d expected, but she said what she’d come to say. And she’d voiced it with honesty, conviction, even passion. She looked him full in the face, ready to defend her claim. But he said, “I know. I’ve seen your paintings.” His reply caught her off guard,

beguiled and silenced her. Had she really expected a fight? He gave a small smile that signaled whatever he said next should be understood as a joke. He said, "You like African masks." And suddenly it seemed to her there was nothing more to say. Twice that day she'd entered a conversation driven by an urgent need for order and affirmation, for precise and conclusive declarations, and twice her quests had turned suddenly meaningless, the determined pursuit of certainty had simply turned to gas and evaporated.

Hedrick pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, mopped his brow.

"You know what?" Carol said. "Enough of this. I'm going for a swim."

"You're what?"

She looked down at her dress, wondering if she'd meant what she'd said, if she was willing to let Hedrick see her almost naked. She made a quick, perfunctory scan for houses or boaters or evening walk-takers, and then thought, *To hell with it*. She pulled her dress over her head and said, "You're welcome to join me."

She stood before him, starkly white in her underwear and bra, and he averted his eyes. He said, "People don't swim here. Maybe that means it's polluted." But Carol kicked off her shoes and started into the shallow water. A cool breeze swept across the lake, rippling it, and blew against her sweat-damp skin. A chill took her. She crossed her arms below her breasts, shivered and hugged herself against it, and the terrible memory returned to Hedrick, insistent, and he saw himself among schoolmates, a noisy, teasing pack of boys he had tried to befriend. He'd invited them to his grandfather's cabin at another lake, and on this afternoon the five of them had slipped away from the chaperoning adults and ran, nervous and giddy with the thrill of stolen freedom, to a neighbor's dock. They were going to pile into the rowboat there and paddle to an island far out in the middle of the lake, a band of intrepid adventurers setting sail for virgin lands. The four other boys reached the dock before Hedrick, and they leapt lightly, with the grace of pirates storming a merchant vessel, from dock to wobbly boat, but as Hedrick followed the stretch of water he had to clear seemed to suddenly expand—had Ricky Ellis pushed off with his paddle, a mean and dangerous prank?—and in mid-air he realized he wouldn't reach the boat. His outstretched foot touched only the lip of the gunnel and he fell backward into the water, smacking his head against the rocky bottom of the lake. On his back, his clothes soaked through, his shoulder in pain and the back of his head throbbing with what would turn out to be a fairly deep cut, he endured the boys' laughter, made a show of laughing at himself, until finally he gathered himself and stood and, his clothes heavy and dripping, squeezed in among the boys. He strove to keep up with them as they claimed the island, he defied his grandfather's scolding as they watched on, but his hope of befriendng them had turned to ruins—he knew as Ricky Ellis paddled them away from the dock that whether or not the pleasure they found in his company came at his expense he would never believe it could be otherwise. He spent the rest of the afternoon in shamed silence, and soon he chose to eat his lunches alone in the library.

He wanted to think he'd come a long way since then, he told himself he'd come a long way, but the pain of that afternoon was still unbearably fresh. He could still see the boat slip away from his outstretched foot, still feel his head hit the rocky floor of the lake, still hear, through the muffling of water, the boys' delighted laughter. And as long as that was true, he thought, he could help no one, least of all Carol, who stood with her back toward him, ankle-deep in the water, neither headed out for her swim nor giving up and coming back to dry land.

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