

VIII

November

Ten o'clock. It was too late for Bill to come now. How lonesome the apartment was without him in it. Lucy stubbed out her cigarette. It would be nice if he would let her know when he wasn't coming. But after all these years, could you blame him for taking her for granted a little? How many years had it been? Since he came to Washington -- nearly ten years, she supposed.

It only goes to show what can happen if you sit down next to a strange man at the zoo and offer him some of your popcorn. Mom used to warn her against doing things like that. But there he'd been on that bench near the bears, looking so cold and forlorn and alone in a jacket too small

for him. It strained over his broad shoulders. Yes, that was what you noticed first about him, the broad shoulders, the power in him, the energy. The next thing you noticed was how helpless he looked, how vulnerable. As if a kind word or a cross one could change his whole day. Oh, he'd hardened a bit since then!

But that day he'd been happy to sit beside her on the bench and to throw pieces of her popcorn to the brown bear who reared back on his haunches and waved his open mouth around, once in awhile succeeding in catching a piece of the stale popcorn. And Bill too would reach out for anyone who'd give him a kind word. He was so lonely, said Bill (those many years ago), and Washington seemed so unfriendly, he didn't know a soul. She was the first person he'd spoken to outside of work.

Mom was still alive then, and she lived with Mom and took care of her. She'd been doing that for as long as she could remember, almost. And she was a good girl, a nice girl, had never even kissed a man hardly, except an occasional goodnight kiss but the boys couldn't put up with Mom's sharp tongue or, perhaps, with her own. She'd never been too tolerant of fools. Well, Bill was a fool and he wasn't a fool, if you can be one and not be one at the same time. But he'd known

how to deal with Mom -- gently, with grace, teasing her bad humor with what Lucy supposed was southern gallantry. Poor old Mom, she'd got quite fond of Bill in the end, and when she was gone -- it had been three years now -- the apartment was too big and empty for Lucy. But she'd thought then that Bill might move in, that they might get married -- more the fool she! And now, when she knew they would not, she couldn't find another apartment anywhere, for love nor money, in wartime Washington. Still, she would not take in a boarder, though she felt guilty about it with the housing situation as desperate as it was, but she couldn't abide the thought of strangers privy to her way of living.

For after all those years Bill still came and stayed the night, leaving in the early morning with a husbandly kiss. And if they weren't married they were still together. And if he wasn't as ardent, if he never brought her flowers now except on her birthday, if he only came once or twice a week, and if those fantasies about weddings and babies (chubby little miniature Bills) were just that, fantasies, still he did come and he was always there on her birthday and all the holidays, and whenever she was sick. Who else could he confide his fears to, his four-o'clock-in-the-morning horrors: was he too fat, would he ever do anything really good at the

Institute, did he make her happy in bed? And she said, "Of course you do, you know you do." In spite of the fact that yes, he was too fat, and no, she didn't think he'd ever do anything really great, not like that friend of his, that Dr. Corbrey. She'd met him one Saturday when they were stopping by the lab to pick up something or other. How embarrassed Bill had been, trying to explain her -- but why did she have to be explained? And Dr. Corbrey was so serious about his work while Bill always seemed to find it so dull, as she said to him later. But that was no reason for him to snap at her and to make nasty remarks about her smoking. Why she should give up smoking for someone who showed no indication of ever wanting to marry her she really couldn't see.

And no, sometimes in bed she almost cried with frustration lately. Lately it seemed as if the light had gone out of him, as if his mind was somewhere else altogether when they made love, as if he wasn't paying any attention, and then it wasn't any good. But she'd sooner die than tell him that. You couldn't tell a man like him something like that. So she said instead how good he was, how kind, how brilliant, and how he hadn't gained an ounce since she met him, how nice he looked with his strong shoulders and his fine healthy body (no, no, it was not out of shape, it was not) and -- but he

kissed her then and she thought it was true, after all, he was nice. When he was paying attention -- as he was now -- he was very nice indeed.

And later, as he slept, not snoring (he never snored) but twitching a little in his sleep, perhaps having that nightmare about the lake, she'd run her hand down his naked back. It was good most of the time even if it wasn't the same as it had been in the beginning, that first time -- oh, months and months after they'd started going together. He'd been so sweet, so ardent. "You're beautiful," he'd said, "you're so beautiful." (But she was better looking now.) She'd cried out the first time, and his landlady had come down the hall and pounded on his door, saying anxiously (but she was pretending), "Mr. Jamison, is something wrong? I heard a noise." But it was too late, already too late. They lay in each other's arms and it was too late. And for the first time she felt that warmth that started where what had happened had happened and spread up and up, through her chest and arms and to her face till it burned a steady flame inside her.

She hadn't looked at another man since that day.

Things like that don't disappear, she thought, and she got into bed with a bowl of carrots to nibble on (she watched her weight) and the new Raymond Chandler. They don't disappear,

she thought, they just calm down a bit when people get older.

And she found her place in the book and read:

San Bernardino baked and shimmered in the afternoon heat. The air was hot enough to blister my tongue. I drove through it gasping, stopped long enough to buy a pint of liquor in case I fainted before I got to the mountains, and started up the long grade to Crestline.

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December

Mr. Morris scraped snow off the sidewalk, huffing and puffing in the cold air all the world like a crusty old walrus. "Walrus," he snorted and laughed, for the snow was melting, sparkling and glimmering in the sunlight, faster than he could scrape it. Walrus, that was good, Mindy would like that. "You old bear," she called him, "you big old bear," and she kissed him on the back of the neck, standing on tiptoe to do it. Fifty years married and she kissed him on the back of the neck and called him an old bear!

How good it was to be alive and shoveling snow on a cold sunny December morning, and the snow lay clean and white, a thin sheet of winter, melting now under the sun. Elsewhere on the block only Tommy next door had bothered to shovel. The others had depended on the sun to brush away the winter's first snowfall. Early in the morning while he and Mindy sat at the breakfast table, eating their soft-boiled eggs from

delicate china cups they had bought in England years ago, Tommy had been out there shoveling. Tommy looked after things religiously over there -- yes, religiously, that was the right word for it. With his father away, he was the man of the house.

Mr. Morris whistled as he brushed the wet snow off his car. "A tisket, a tasket, a red and yellow basket," he whistled. He'd heard Emma sing that, early this morning. While her brother bent to his labors, she danced around in the snow and sang "A tisket, a tasket, a red and yellow basket" in her sweet clear voice, getting some of the notes right, others wrong. Still you got the idea.

Pretty little girl. Good-looking boy, though he was just a wee bit on the chubby side, though he had thinned out some since the summer. Getting his height now, probably. Sometimes he wondered -- old walrus that he was -- if Mindy minded about children. But then he had only to look at her, he had only to see her sitting in her favorite chair by the sunny window with the cat purring in her lap. She didn't have a wrinkle, she was as bright-eyed as the day more than fifty years ago when they'd gone bicycling together and he'd fallen in love with her in her bicycling outfit -- her voluminous knickerbockers (so ridiculous), her sailor hat, her Norfolk jacket. Even if she was the little girl next door, his best

friend's kid sister, she was cute as a button and, noticing it then, he knew he'd noticed it all along. He'd just been waiting for something, he didn't know what, perhaps to see how cute she looked in her bicycling outfit.

Fifty years married and they'd never disagreed about anything to speak of. They couldn't help it that there hadn't been children. No use crying over something you can't help. They'd probably had more fun without. And you wouldn't want to have children -- oh, you wouldn't want to have sons -- in times like these.

But sometimes his heart turned within him when Emma asked him grave questions over the fence. "Will the snow hurt the bulbs, Mr. Morris?" she said so seriously, as if she really knew what a bulb was -- well, maybe she did. And "When do the snowdrops bloom?" There was snow on the ground, she said sadly, but she couldn't see a snowdrop anywhere.

There she was now, back from church in her uncle's big car, and she wore a pale pink or yellow or blue dress under her coat, he supposed. Her voice came floating over the snow. "Come on, Uncle Bill," she was saying. Nobody moved fast enough for Emma.

They aged you, children did. Mr. Morris leaned on his snow shovel, waved at Emma. Her uncle lifted her up and

carried her into the house on his shoulder, probably so she wouldn't get her shoes wet though the path looked quite dry.

Just then Mr. Morris heard his own front door open, heard footsteps down the path, heard Mindy call "John." He turned, smiling, and got a fine shower of snow in his face, like a benediction. And her clear laugh rang out.

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January

There was that boy again, out shoveling snow. She could see him from the chair by the window where she sat, resting her chin on the back. She ought to bark but the sun was warm and she was old. It was hardly worth the trouble. It would just bring her people downstairs to scold her. They were old too. They had all got old together, old and white-headed and lazy, sleeping all day in the good warm sun. Her people didn't like her to bark. Still the boy made ugly noises as his shovel scraped against the sidewalk and it hurt her ears. A growl began deep in her throat but it petered out with a breathy mild "woof." Just clearing her throat.

Would the winter ever end? She was stiff and dried out from being inside so long. Not that it had been a bad winter, as winters go. There hadn't been much snow but it was too cold to go outside and lie on the grass in the sun, and that

was all she cared about.

Once she had chased rabbits over an open field, leaping in the air, her legs like springs. But now -- she stretched first one leg and then the other out behind her, arching her back, yawning -- now her legs ached in the cold weather and sometimes they collapsed beneath her. Then her people said "poor old dog" and gave her a scrap of meat.

How the rabbits had flown in front of her once and how fast she had run. Now her people said "It's too cold for the poor old dog" and only let her out for the necessities.

The little girl came outside and called the boy and he followed her into the house. The little girl had such nice round little legs. Come spring she would go outside and bite the little girl's fat little legs -- just a little nip to make her squeal. Yes, that would be delightful. That was worth waiting through the long cold winter for.

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February

He went down the street and knocked on Emma's door and Emma's mother opened the door and Willie went in. Then Emma's mother called upstairs to where Emma was. "Emma, Willie's here," she called. Emma came to the top of the stairs and peered over the railing. Willie could see her yellow dress,

the bottom part that was called a ruffle. Sometimes there were ruffles on Emma's underpants also but Willie couldn't tell from downstairs and Emma's mother wouldn't let them play upstairs in Emma's room anymore since the time she had come and found them playing doctor. Oh, she hadn't liked that at all. She had been real mad about that. She had never got mad about anything before, not like his mother who got mad at everything he did. And Emma had said it was all his fault, which wasn't true, and anyway she didn't have to say it even if it was true, but Emma's mother had just said that it was a bad thing to do and they shouldn't do it anymore. But she went on being nice to Willie in spite of it.

Now Emma said, "I don't want to play with Willie, Mommy. Tell him to go away. Uncle Bill's coming."

It was snowing out and Willie's mother had made him wear a sweater and his snowsuit and a scarf around his neck and the knitted cap that Santa Claus had brought for Christmas and the mittens pinned to his sleeves that went with it, and his boots. But Emma would not play with him. He would have to go back home again and take off the cap and the mittens and the snowsuit and the sweater and the scarf and the boots, and there was nothing to do at home.

Emma's mother said she was very sorry about Emma being

so mean and that maybe tomorrow Emma wouldn't be so mean. Willie thought that Emma's mother ought to spank her for being so mean to him but he didn't say that to Emma's mother. There was no telling how a mother was going to react to something like that. It was better not to say anything. Besides Emma's mother was very fat now. Emma said it was because she had a baby in her stomach.

Willie trudged back up the street, the snow crunching and squeaking under his boots. When he got home he sat in the chair that the cat liked, just so the cat couldn't sit there. Every weekend Emma's Uncle Bill came over in his big shiny car and he took Emma and her brother and her mother to magical wonderful places that Willie would never ever get to see.

"Oh, Willie," said his mother coming into the room, "Look at the rug." The snow had melted off his boots and made big wet spots on the rug. But Willie didn't care -- it was his mother's fault that he had no Uncle Bill to take him to magical places. She deserved wet spots on the rug.

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The lab was dark and deserted. It was Sunday, and nobody worked on Sunday except Peter Reynolds. If you thought about it -- and he did for a minute, blowing on his fingers to warm them (he hated the cold weather) -- you could feel good

and sorry for yourself, slaving away, day after day, year after year, while your promise (and there had been promise once) faded. And even the Army wouldn't take you (you were asthmatic, lame, too old) and so you couldn't go and get yourself some glory, like Corbrey was doing. Still there were compensations.

Because Corbrey and you had shared the same road, so to speak, but Corbrey ran and leaped down the road (nobody had any doubts about his brilliance) while you limped down it, investigating every side street, constantly losing your way and wasting your time. But now, with Corbrey off "doing his part" (but he had a desk job in London), in your own steady fashion you went straight down the road Corbrey had so thoughtfully made smooth for you -- for himself really but that was his tough luck. You had to be honest about these things.

Well, what had happened since yesterday when he'd finally snapped off the light at nine o'clock? He was never in a hurry to go home. There was nothing at home, nothing there but the mangy rug by the fireplace where Pippi had slept for sixteen years until one night she closed her big sad basset eyes and gave a little shiver and lay still. He hoped to die like that himself some day, just close his eyes and go. But no one would sit over him as he had over Pippi, the tears running down his cheeks, yet he was not a sentimental man by

any means. Rest easy, old dog, sleep well, he had thought. And even today, a whole year later almost to the day (but still he couldn't bear to throw out the old rug) he couldn't think of her with a dry eye.

Wearily -- but there was nothing else to do on a Sunday -- he reached for his notebook and bent to his work.

But what was this?

It wasn't possible. He looked again. Yes, it was unmistakable.

"God damn!" said Peter Reynolds, "and after all this time!" And he began furiously to write.

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March

The hell with it, the mockingbird might have said, if he'd had access to words as well as music. Spring was just around the corner, he must have been thinking, and even if there was snow on the ground it was melting in places and the air had that smell to it that made you feel you wanted to do things you hadn't thought about all winter. And what was that flash of white and grey over there -- there by the kitchen window -- those wings with the white chevrons flashing? The mockingbird shot like a bullet toward the intruder and expelled him. There, that was better! Onward then (undeniably

the mockingbird thought that) to the top of the chimney.

For one must sing!

* * *

And Bill, tenderly scooping up the bunch of daffodils from the front seat, slid out of the car and shut the door. But wasn't that -- ? Yes, those sweet trills, that was a mockingbird.

Tonight. Tonight he would speak.