

K.D. Miller / SPARROW COLOURS

I wish Brian wouldn't jiggle the table. Does he have to chop up his eggs and sausages and potato pancakes all at once? Now he's buttering his toast. More jiggling. Will he ever stop worrying his food and just eat?

I shake open my napkin and settle it on my lap, wondering why the jiggling table bothers me so much. Then when Brian starts spreading sour cream all over his potato pancakes, I know.

The other night I woke up and found him with the light still on, studying a script. It must have been the jiggling of the bed that woke me. *I could climb aboard*, I thought, when I saw what he was doing. *Or at least lend a hand*. But I didn't even let him know I was awake. There was something sad about the small geyser of semen when it came. The thickness and whiteness of it. Even the sound it made lubricating his hand, *snick-snack, snick-snack*. When I went back to sleep I had dreams about dry plants I had forgotten to water, starving cats I had neglected to feed.

Feed. Food. Eat. We did come here to eat, didn't we? Breakfast, specifically. I pick up my fork and look down at my plate. Did I order this? *A medley of fresh seasonal fruits nestled round a generous scoop of frozen strawberry yogurt*. My yogurt is becoming a pink lake. The cubes and crescents and triangles of fruit remind me of educational toys.

When I look up, Brian is watching me. He watches me a lot these days. Practically follows me around, like a little boy afraid of losing his mother.

"Not hungry, Dear?"

I put my fork down and shake my head.

"Not feeling well?"

"No. Yes, I mean. I'm fine, really."

"Because we can go home. If you want to."

"No. I'm okay. Just not hungry. That's all."

"We don't have to do this. If you're not up to it. Not today, anyway. We can always —"

"Brian."

I don't often call him that. He doesn't often call me Daisy. We call each other Honey, Hon, Sweetie, Sweetum, Sweetheart, Sweet Stuff, Boo Boo, Boo Bum, Bumble, Boopsie, Stink. ("Do you two fuck while you're doing the dishes?" somebody once asked us.) Pooh, Pooh-Bear, Noodle, Strudel, Doodle. (One of our running jokes is that we in fact never exchanged names, and are now too embarrassed to ask.) Baby, Babe, Daddy, Mommy, Papa, Mama.

"Brian. I feel fine. I'm just not hungry. And I don't want to go home. Okay?"

"You're sure? Because —"

I lean across the table and kiss him. To shut him up. We've always been a very kissy pair. We can have whole conversations practically eating each others' faces. This kiss is brief. Efficient. There is coffee on his breath. His moustache is wet, as if we've just made love. I go to wipe my lips with my napkin, but catch myself just in time. Then I put my chin on my hand and look out the window. Under my elbow, the table starts to jiggle again.

How many times has he lain awake and jerked off in the last three weeks? That's how long it's been. For the first two, we had no choice. It was even in writing, in the pamphlet they gave me at the clinic. *You must refrain from sexual intercourse . . .* But this last week, it's been up to me. It's been my call. And Brian has been so good about waiting. Staying on his side of the bed. Kissing me closed-mouthed or on the forehead. I know he'll never hint or manipulate. I know he'll wait for me to come to him.

I just wish I knew what I was waiting for.

There isn't much to look at out the window. Grey sky. Brown sidewalk. White patches of snow speckled black with grit. It was a strange winter for Vancouver, snowy and cold. And now spring is taking its time.

"The colours of March are sparrow colours," I announce, hating the chirpiness of my tone but glad of anything to break the silence.

"You're right!" Actor that he is, Brian invests so much enthusiasm in those two words that I think I might cry. "If we want to check if a poster or a frame is going to blend in, all we have to do is look out at the day."

Sparrow colours. Grey, beige, charcoal and white. I'm the one who named them, once we had finished shuffling paint chips. We're going to do the whole new apartment in those four shades, starting right from scratch.

"It'll be strange to have all new stuff," I say, turning away from the window.

"It'll be *great* to have all new stuff." And I can see that for him, it will be. He has a talent for novelty. He likes a clean break. It irritates him to see that big, pale new place dotted with our dark, shabby old things.

"I hate this crap," he kept saying while we were packing. "I hate forks that don't match and I hate brick-and-board bookshelves and I hate Indian bedspread curtains. And I'm sick of sleeping on a damned mattress on the floor. I want a *bed*. A decent, proper *bed*."

"You'll have it," I kept telling him. "We just need this stuff for a little while longer. After that, you can have whatever you want." When he let me know how much he was making for the TV series pilot, all I could say was, "Are you sure?" Then I started packing the dishes we would end up giving to the Sally Ann.

Our quarry today is posters to frame and hang on the walls. Next month, it could be a couch and coffee table, or maybe bedroom furniture. But today, it's posters. We have so much more wall space now, what with the second bedroom. *You need a study*, Brian kept saying when we were apartment hunting. *And now I can afford for you to have one*. "A room of her own!" one of our friends trumpeted, helping us move in last weekend.

Which sparrow colour should go on the walls of my room, I wonder, and which on the trim? Because there's no question of doing it in orange or purple. Not that I would. But for all it's mine, it's still ours. And from now on, everything, the posters we get today, any furniture or fabrics we pick out after today, will have to blend with grey, beige, white and charcoal.

Good thing for us that we're somewhere between beige and white.

Good thing for Beastie that she's black.

"I wonder if Beastie will ever settle in," I say, putting a bit of cream in my coffee. Brian has persuaded me to have coffee, at least, even if I'm not going to eat.

"She has to. She's got no choice. But Sweetheart, as long as you fuss over her, she'll sulk."

It's hard not to fuss over Beastie, given her stage presence. These days she manages to eat, wash, even sleep with the air of a dispossessed monarch. "It's all the same stuff," I tell her again and again. "The same couch you used to sharpen your claws on. The same corners where you rubbed your chin." But all I get is the green glare. As if she knows the truth. That her old world will in fact disappear bit by bit until she has only her bowl, her litter pan and the two of us for continuity. Well, another of our running jokes is that we stay together for the sake of the cat.

"Yeah, you're right," I say briskly. "She's getting too used to prowling around on top of those boxes, too. I should unpack them."

"Only when you feel like it, Hon. There's no rush."

"You know, if we got our new shelves, I could do the books and records, at least. They're what's taking up most of the room."

"Okay, Babe. But be careful not to overdo it."

"I'm *fine*, Brian."

Honestly, what does he see when he looks at me? Something pale and Pre-Raphaelite? I'm as much a Brueghelian milkmaid as ever. Less than an hour after coming out of the anaesthetic, I was striding down the hall of the clinic, with Brian running after me to take my arm.

But I still haven't unpacked those boxes. I should. I don't know why I haven't. Their labels, in my printing, rebuke me at every turn. *BOOKS, AUTHORS D TO F MEDICINE CABINET AND SPICE RACK. RECORDS, ARTISTS M TO P. WIND CHIMES AND CANDLE HOLDERS.*

I discovered I had a talent for packing. Could work obsessively at it for hours without saying a word. There was something about wrapping fragile things in paper, dovetailing them in a box with other fragile things, then sealing and labelling the box, that absorbed me.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked me more than once in the week

before we moved.

"Yes. I'm okay."

"Do you want to talk? We can. You can tell me about it, if that would help."

I waited until I had finished wrapping a cup. I wasn't used to this kind of attention. Usually I was the one who worried about him. Felt his forehead if he had a cold. Asked him what was wrong if he was quiet. Spun panicky scenarios if he was late. *He's been killed. He's been seduced.*

"There's nothing to tell," I said at last. "I went to sleep. Half an hour later, I woke up. It didn't hurt. And I don't remember a thing."

"Was anybody mean to you? I've heard that they can be."

"No. Everybody was incredibly nice."

"You don't — feel bad about it, do you?"

"What, guilty? Do you think I should?"

"No! I'm just a bit worried, that's all. You're kind of off in your own world."

"There's a lot to do." It was true, if not quite the truth. But I wasn't sure what the truth was. What if I had had to push through a crowd of demonstrators? What if just one person had been less than incredibly nice? Or if I had stayed awake? Had a local instead of a general? Would I have had some hurt, then, to bring home and cry about in Brian's arms? And would that have made a difference?

Maybe. Maybe not. I fitted the wrapped cup into a box of wrapped cups, then picked up another.

Now Brian reaches across the table for my hand and holds it, stroking the back of it with his thumb. "Look, Doll, I know that whenever we do something new, I always jump in with both feet while you're still trying to weigh the pros and cons. But all this stuff that's been happening. The good stuff, I mean. It's happening for you too. Because it's all just so much crap if I can't give it to you. And I want to give you things, now that I can. I want to give you time. And freedom. To write. Just write. I don't want you to take shitty day-jobs any more."

The friction of his thumb is making a warm spot on the back of my hand. I don't want to hurt his feelings by pulling away.

"And listen," he says. "We both know that I'm not doing any-

thing for you that you wouldn't do for me. If you suddenly wrote a best-seller or something. Right?"

I have to smile. I have yet to publish a single word. My thesis novel, *Dame Julian To Her Cat*, is a monologue spoken by an anchorite walled up for life in a whitewashed room.

"I love you, Honey."

"I love you too." The warm spot on the back of my hand is getting positively hot. There was a time, just three weeks ago, when I would have turned my hand over to get his stroking on my palm. Then leaned close to whisper, "Fuck the posters. Let's go home."

Now all I can do is try to keep from pulling my hand away and wonder how, exactly, someone falls out of love. Funny phrase. Fall out of love. It feels more as if love has fallen out of me. Because I honestly don't know where it's gone. I had it. Now I don't. It's not something I would throw away. Or pack away in a box. And it couldn't be surgically removed, either. Scraped free, then suctioned out. So where is it?

"Everything okay here?" The waiter.

On cue, still holding hands, we smile and say, "Terrific!"

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"How do you feel about the test results?"

The question sounded practised, the voice professionally neutral. Her nameplate said Doctor Zareen Dotiwalla. A friend had recommended her as *absolutely non-judgemental*. She was waiting for directions. From me. Answer A would set one chain of events in motion. Answer B, another.

I wanted to go home. I wanted not to have to sit in this office, have this conversation, make this decision. I wanted to be as young as I felt. But I couldn't be. Because I was *in trouble*. One of those oddly formal phrases, like *juvenile delinquent*, that had dotted adult conversation when I was growing up. I was, potentially at least, an *unwed mother*.

The doctor pushed a box of kleenex toward me. Her voice warmed up a little. "Is there someone you would like to talk it over with, Daisy?"

"I — We already have talked it over."

"And what did the two of you decide?"

"He said it was up to me."

The doctor was silent. Her face maintained the studied neutrality of a banker's face, a policeman's face.

"That makes him sound like he's copping out," I said into the silence. "He's not. He just thinks he has no right — He thinks that since it would have such an impact on my body and my life, I should decide."

It had sounded wonderful when Brian said it. I wished he could be here with me now to say it again, but he had an audition. "I'll cancel it and come with you," he had offered. "If you want me to. Just say the word."

"So your partner has no preference, one way or the other," the doctor said. "And you tell me this is not at all convenient, and that you were taking steps to prevent it."

I nodded, remembering my crunchy-granola objections to the pill. Remembering sitting in the bathtub with Brian, saying "Balloop!" then winking out my diaphragm and twirling it on one finger. Jesus Christ.

Dr. Dotiwalla sighed. "Well. What is done is done. The important thing is to help you do whatever you want to do." She waited, face, posture, manner once again entirely neutral.

I looked at her desk. At the framed diplomas on her office walls. Then back at her. She was still waiting. When I finally spoke, my voice sounded as young as I felt. The words were whispery, full of breath.

Slowly, expression blank, the doctor nodded. It was an oddly liturgical gesture.

Then she told me she would be right back, that there was a form she had to get from her receptionist, but in the meantime she would like me to review the proper use of the diaphragm, and to at least reconsider going on the pill, once all this was over. She handed me what looked like a viewmaster and told me to look through the lens and turn the crank. I did. It was a colour video of a woman inserting a diaphragm. She was dressed in a short white lab coat and nothing else. She put one foot up on a chair, spread her labia and inserted a diaphragm into her vagina.

All I could think was, my God, is she an out of work actress? Does

Brian know her? Did they pay her union scale? Did her agent phone her up and say, *I've got a job for you. It's a little different . . . ?*

Then I discovered that I could speed the film up by turning the crank faster, or slow it down, or make it go backwards, or forwards and backwards. Foot up, foot down. Labia spread, labia closed. Diaphragm in, diaphragm out.

I began to giggle soundlessly, turning the crank. I was all loose and jangly inside from crying, and the laughter came out in scraps and shards of breath.

Dr. Dotiwalla smiled when she came back in, carrying a printed form. "A bit surreal, isn't it?" she said. Her manner had relaxed, warmed. I wondered if she approved of my decision, or if she would have acted the same way no matter what I had decided.

She sat down at her desk and wrote something on the form. Then she leaned on her elbows and looked at me. "Now, Daisy, what happens is this. I write to my hospital board, saying that continuing in your present condition would cause you physical and psychological hardship. It is just a formality. They will not ask for proof, and no one is ever turned down. Then, once they approve my recommendation, we make an appointment for the procedure to be carried out."

"How much is it going to cost?"

Till now, living poor with Brian had been an adventure, funky and bohemian. But three words, *It was positive*, had shrunk my life down, had made it grubby and desperate. I was still a student, working part time shelving books in the UBC library. Brian was unemployed. His last stage job had ended a week ago when the show he was in folded. His audition today was for a part in a series of root beer commercials. We both knew it was a shot in the dark. Too big a job for an unknown to get.

"B.C. Medical will cover everything," Dr. Dotiwalla said, "except for a nominal sum. About seventeen dollars. Is that all right, Daisy?"

I nodded. It would have to be. And we always managed somehow. Always found enough for the rent. And for Beastie's food and litter. Now we would find seventeen dollars.

"So," the doctor was saying, "if all goes well, and I assure you it will, I will be in touch with you in a week or so about your appointment."

"And then, do I come back here?"

"Here? No, I should not have to see you afterwards."

"No, I mean, for the — Where does it happen?"

"In one of the out-patient clinics. Doctor Bernstrom will give you the address when he sees you."

"Doctor Bernstrom? Who's he?"

"He is the — I am sorry. I should have been clearer. I am a G.P. I do not actually do these things." She grimaced very slightly, just a flicker, then her face smoothed. "You see, once the hospital board has approved my recommendation, I will make an appointment for you to see Dr. Bernstrom. He is a gynaecologist. And he is the one who will actually carry out the procedure." She smiled sympathetically. "This must seem like a great many hoops to jump through."

It didn't, actually. I looked again at her desktop. Once more at the framed diplomas on her wall. Finally back at her.

"Something else you want to ask?" she said, when our eyes met.

"This is — " I began, then stopped.

"Yes, Daisy?"

By some bizarre chance, had I wandered into the wrong office? Was she the wrong Doctor Dotiwalla? Had we been talking all this time about my teeth?

"This is an *abortion* I'm having, right?"

The tiny grimace again. "The medically correct term is dilation and curettage. D and C. It is minor surgery. And Daisy, I would like to suggest that you think of it that way. As minor surgery."

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"What are you thinking about?" Brian asks me, once the waiter has topped up our coffee, taken my untouched plate and left.

"I'm remembering something."

"Well," he says helpfully, "what are you remembering?"

"Something from when I was a kid. I don't know how old I was. Not too old. Eight or nine. I was in the back yard looking over the fence at the man who lived in the house behind us. He was cutting his back lawn. Ordinary man. Ordinary house. Family just like ours. But all of a sudden I noticed how *square* everything was. The house was

square, the yard was square, even the man was kind of square and beefy. He had started on the outside and was moving round and round into the centre, in smaller and smaller squares.

"And I remember thinking, *He should have started in the centre, so he could end up on the outside. That way, he could escape. Just leave the lawnmower where it is, and go. Run away. Someplace where he could be all by himself.* Because I was convinced that that was exactly what the man wanted to do, deep down. But the squares he was cutting in the lawn were somehow keeping him from doing it.

"And it was as if a door or something had opened up in my head, because I started looking at everybody that way. I suddenly didn't know why people had anything to do with each other. Why friends were friends, or why families were families. I didn't know why my father came home every day, or why we all ate supper together, or why my parents visited my school on parents' night, or anything.

"It wasn't that I hated other people. Or that I thought they hated me. I just needed to understand what kept them together. I needed to know what that human glue was.

"I asked my mother, and she said, *It's because we love each other.* So I asked her what that meant, to love somebody. She said, *Well, I love you and I love your brother and I love your father and Grandma loves us all, and so does Grandpa, and so does Aunt Heather . . .*

"She went on and on, naming just about everybody I knew, but she never said what love *was*. And she must have seen the look on my face, because she said, *You love us too, Daisy. Don't you?*

"Well, I think I came out with something like, *Do I have to?* I wasn't being a smartass. I really wanted to know. But my mother got all flustered and said, *What kind of question is that? Of course we have to love each other! Because if we don't — Well, how would you like it if we all went for a trip in the car someplace? Port Dover or Port Maitland. And at the end of the day, when we were coming home, we just got in the car and drove away and left you there? How would you like that?*

"I thought about it for a minute. And then, I said, *Why don't you?"*

I stop talking and just sit looking out the window. Brian doesn't say anything. He doesn't say anything for a long time. So long that I have to turn and look at him. And when I do, I know what's going to happen.

He didn't plan it. He didn't bring me here to do it. But I can see it in his face, his hands, the slant of his body. "Daisy," he says, then stops. I know what he's going to say. He opens his mouth again, then closes it again. He's going to say he's tired. Of waiting. Of staying on his side of the bed, in more ways than one. Because it's not just sex. It's everything. He can see right inside me, to the empty spaces where my feelings used to be. And he's decided they're never going to come back. So he wants someone new to go with his new apartment and new life. Someone who can share his joy.

"Daisy —"

Or maybe it's something very simple. Maybe he just didn't like my childhood reminiscence. Does there have to be a reason? I'm a fine one to ask.

Here it comes. I do feel afraid. A little. And sad. A little. And something else. I feel —

"Will you marry me?"

— free.

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In the weeks between Doctors Dotiwalla and Bernstrom, I kept waking up in the middle of the night, going into the kitchen and making myself a cup of chamomile tea. Then, once I had drunk it, I would go back to bed and most often be asleep while Brian was getting ready to leave for the day's shooting.

The first cheque had already arrived. *Pay to the order of Brian Beagle*, followed by an amount that, even after his agent's cut, was more money than we had ever had.

The root beer commercials, twelve of them, were being shot all over Vancouver, and would be released nationally, one every month, for a year. In the meantime, Brian's agent was pushing him for a part in a TV series pilot. "It's starting, Babe," he said to me more than once, his voice whispery with excitement. "I've paid my dues, and it's starting to happen."

It was. And there was no reason that it shouldn't. Brian's bearded, rubbery face was perfect for the part, a mad scientist trying to duplicate the client's root beer formula. And being an unknown had

actually worked in his favour. He was fresh. He carried no typecast baggage. He was a find.

So there was no reason for me to keep imagining him sneaking into movie theatres, sitting all day in the dark, then coming home and telling me lies about filming a commercial. Or to worry that we had gotten somebody else's luck through clerical error, and when some bureaucrat found out, we'd have to give it back.

I wondered if it might be his name. *Brian Beagle* just didn't sound like a celebrity, however minor. But there it was on the cheque. So it was happening. It was real.

The mornings he was shooting, I would wake up to find his place in bed empty and cool beside me. We had always started the day together, and I missed that. But when I apologized for not being awake to see him off, he shook his head and said simply, "You're pregnant."

It became an all-purpose excuse, an automatic absolution. Tired? You're pregnant. Bitchy? You're pregnant. Don't want sex? Then wake him up two hours later because you've changed your mind? You're pregnant. Can't eat? Eat everything in sight? Can't sleep? Sleep half the day? Constipated? Paranoid?

You're pregnant.

I wished that *pregnant* was something Brian and I could both see. Touch. Walk around and examine from all sides, like a mushroom growing up through a crack in the floor. But it wasn't. Pregnant was inside me. No. It *was* me. Pregnant was what I had become.

I had always wondered whether, if I did conceive, some primal maternal instinct would finally kick in. Some fierce, earthy joy that would come up out of nowhere to buoy me through the nine months till delivery. It hadn't. All I felt was invaded. Inhabited. Occupied. I couldn't love the thing that had attached itself inside me. I didn't hate it either. I just wished it would go away. And it would, soon enough. But in the meantime, I was pregnant.

I began to hate the word. Such a fat pink pig of a word. And from there, I went on to hate maternity clothes. Not that I would ever have to wear them. I just hated them on principle. Their pastel cuteness. All that beribboned fuss at collar and sleeve, designed to draw the eye away from the stomach.

And the world was suddenly full of stomachs. I couldn't go into a supermarket without seeing at least half a dozen. Women like oceans walking. Swollen, bulging, stretched to bursting with something not themselves. Something that elbowed their organs, siphoned their blood, leached their bones and teeth.

And kept them awake at night.

Beastie used to visit me in the kitchen while I was making my cup of chamomile. She had always been a prickly, catty cat. But these nights she was strangely kittenish, S-curving through my legs, then kneading my lap while I sat at the table waiting for my tea to cool.

I wondered if she knew something was up, the way she knew about earthquakes. Beastie was a living seismograph that registered tremors neither of us could feel. She would flatten her ears, brace her legs, freeze into what Brian called her Norma Desmond pose, then streak under the couch. There she would stay for hours, while we called to her to stop being such a silly girl, that nothing was happening, that everything was okay.

But then, over the next few days, we would find knick-knacks that had sidestepped their dust circles by half an inch. Hairline cracks in the plaster that had widened or lengthened. And once when I opened a cupboard, a juice glass creeping forward to lean against the door leapt like a live thing into my hand.

That's when we would remember Beastie going strange, and promise to take her more seriously next time. But we never did, and she remained our resident Cassandra.

Those nights in the kitchen, she took to sniffing my breasts, licking a nipple if she could get at one, the way she used to do when she was a kitten. I wondered if she could smell the onset of milk. I didn't know if it was too early for that to be happening. I didn't know anything about being pregnant. And I was perversely proud of my ignorance. Something else I'd started hating was the pregnancy and childbirth sections of bookstores. Was it my imagination, or were they all moving closer to the front? The glossy covers caught my eye the minute I opened the door. *Countdown To Motherhood. Labour of Love. Taking Control of Your Pregnancy.* And always a picture of a woman, smugly exultant or serenely madonnaesque.

How simple to be an animal, I would think, while Beastie stood up

on my lap, stretched into a tall U, then settled back down in a ball. How simple to have no choice. None now because she's been fixed. And none a couple of years ago, because we'd only had her for a few months, and she was so tiny that her going into heat took us by surprise. Her too. The only one who wasn't a total innocent was the long-haired tortoiseshell tom we named Pretty Boy Floyd.

Beastie, for all her seismographical acuity, never twigged to what was going on in her own belly. No matter how lumpen she got, she would try to jump up on the kitchen counter as usual, then slide back down, dragging scratches in the formica. Or she would wriggle into one of her favourite nooks, get stuck and have to back out while we tried not to laugh.

Then one night Brian and I woke to a wetness at our feet and an impossibly tiny mewling. Very gently, we lifted the two-headed creature out onto the rug. There, while Beastie purred and blinked, the miniature head protruding from her rear grew two reaching paws. Tiny claws gripped the rug as the shrieking creature pulled itself out. It lay exhausted for a moment, then began the long blind journey to the nipple, dragging its parachute of afterbirth behind it.

In the morning, when all the kittens were born, Beastie jumped with no trouble at all onto a chair back. From its height she surveyed the squealing, bloody bundle she had left on the rug. She was a different cat. There was a new arch to her neck, a huge self-approval in the slitting of her eyes. She could have posed for the cover photo of one of those pregnancy books.

Except, once they started to grow, she didn't like her kittens much. Would look at them, then glare accusingly at us. Would separate them one from the other and leave them in odd places, behind books, in low kitchen cupboards, under laundry, as if hoping to lose them.

She did all the mother cat things, but she did them hatefully. Sometimes while she was washing one of her kittens a manic look would come into her eyes and she would start chewing on its neck, only stopping when it began to strangle. And when it was time to wean them she put a back foot on each one's face in turn and simply shoved.

Mother love.

I had never even played with dolls. The rocking and feeding and dressing and undressing that other little girls inflicted on their pink plastic babies had mystified me. It still did. I saw mothers on the street now and wondered how they could have let this happen to them. The trapped look in their eyes as they pushed one child in a stroller and pulled another by the hand. Their inability to finish a sentence. The impression they gave of having misplaced themselves. Along with the piano, the easel, the manuscript they were going to get back to, just as soon as the kids were in school, out of school, married, gone.

Gone.

Mine would be gone soon.

Mine.

How could something be mine when I couldn't see it, couldn't feel it, didn't want it? How could it be Brian's?

While the cat purred on my lap I would sip my cooling tea and listen to Brian snoring in the next room. He needed his sleep. The day's shooting started early. But I used to wish he would wake up and come and find me and sit with me. Just sit. Not say anything. There was nothing to say. Or nothing he hadn't said before.

I will respect your decision, whatever it is.

Of course I have feelings in the matter. But that's not the same as having rights.

I won't leave you if you decide to have this baby.

That last one had jarred me. Why did he think he had to say it? I knew he wouldn't just disappear, like Pretty Boy Floyd. Or did I?

People never guessed that Brian was an actor. He didn't glitter or talk loud or suck up all the attention in the room the way other actors did. But at theatre parties I would stand by myself and watch him work the crowd. He was so good at it. He fit so easily into that world. He did try to include me. Would introduce me to somebody who would gush that it was just *wonderful* that I *wrote*. That I was finishing a *master's*. In *creative writing*. And where was I *published*? Oh, but I *would* be! I *would*! And they just couldn't *wait* to read my *work*.

What if that was what Brian was really like, underneath? And he was restraining himself for my sake? How long could he keep it up? How long would he stay with me?

Why *did* he stay with me, anyway? And why did I stay with him? Because we loved each other. But what did that mean? What was it that had made us fall in love? Strange phrase. *Fall in love*. Like falling into a vat of something sticky.

I had never thought it would happen to me. Didn't think I was capable of it. But I was. It had. I could even remember exactly when. Brian and I had just gotten off a bus together, him out the front door, me out the back. We hadn't spotted each other during the ride, but we collided on the sidewalk. We were already friends. We had met in a playwriting course I was taking as part of my master's at UBC. Brian and some other actors had been hired by the creative writing department to help the class workshop their scripts. Mine was so bad, so essentially unplayable, that for ages after I started meeting him for coffee, I assumed he was befriending me out of pity.

But we made each other laugh. And when we bumped into each other outside the bus, we started to laugh again, and couldn't stop. We ended up just holding onto each other, laughing and kissing.

I won't leave you if you decide to have this baby.

Not much danger of that. I didn't even like children. Hadn't liked being one. I was one of those owlish, elderly types whose intelligence in the classroom rendered them stupid on the playground. I could never speak the language of children, or crack their social codes.

But now I laughed and cried so easily in Brian's arms. Talked baby talk and played games. Called him Daddy and Papa. Felt small and cherished, worthy to be held close.

Had he ever noticed how children shied from me? As if they sensed that I had never really been one of them? I was ashamed of my childhood. The awkwardness and loneliness were my dirty little secret.

Would a child of my own see through me? And help its father to see?

I won't leave you —

Oh, there was no point in thinking these thoughts, worrying these worries. It was all academic. The thing that had barely started was soon going to end. The thing that hardly existed would soon not exist at all. As if it had never been.

It. Foetus. Embryo. Infant.
Infanticide.

Infanticide sounded like something out of a Noel Coward play. *There's a whiff of infanticide in the air this evening, my dear. Do you smell it?*

Did Beastie smell it? Would she hiss at me when I came home from the clinic? Or would she give me one of her rare, barbed kisses?

The morning that Brian was out shooting the sixth in the series of commercials, Dr. Dotiwalla phoned. As expected, she said, the hospital board had approved her recommendation. Should she go ahead and make an appointment for me with Dr. Bernstrom?

It was a sunny morning. Rare for Vancouver in March. Rare for Vancouver anytime. I could see dust motes moving in the air. I could hear the clock ticking from the bedroom.

One word. The doctor was waiting for one word from me.

Very well, she answered when I finally said it. Her voice was again carefully neutral. I pictured her once more giving that slow benedictory nod.

•

"Don't answer. Don't say a word. Not yet. Just listen to me. Please."

He looks so young. Chock-full of whatever is so very important, right this minute. "I — " he begins, then stops. "You — Oh, fuck!"

I pull a kleenex out of my pocket. For a second I picture myself holding it to his nose and ordering, *Blow*.

"Sorry," he says, dabbing at his eyes. "I've just been so worried. And so scared. I know you're mad as hell at me. I don't blame you. I've been having all the fun, and you've been taking all the shit. If it was me, I'd be pissed off too."

Mad as hell? Pissed off? All I can think to say is, "Why did you ask me to marry you? I mean, why now?"

"To get your attention."

"What?"

"No! Yes. Partly. I did need to get through to you, Daisy. For weeks now, it's been as if you don't know I'm in the room. And I'm not just talking about sex. Believe me. That's the least of it. Living with you right now is like watching a movie about somebody who lives alone.

Eats all her meals alone. Sleeps alone. And I've started to wonder if what I'm seeing is what you want." He stops, his eyes, his face, his whole body a question.

I look down at my cold coffee. Two weeks ago, while Brian was signing the lease for our new apartment and writing the cheque for first and last month's rent, I stepped into the smaller bedroom and shut the door. I stood all by myself in the middle of the bare floor and breathed. *Oh*, my breath said, going in. And coming out, it said, *yes*.

But then I opened the door back up. I went quickly and found Brian, and put my signature on the lease under his.

For just a moment, I had envisioned staying in that room alone forever, like an anchorite. Never opening the door again.

Dame Julian did it. Survived the plague that killed her husband and child, then spent the rest of her life in a white room without a door, transcribing the visions she had had while hovering between life and death.

She had her meals passed in to her and her slops taken out through a single window. And she had the company of a cat who was there to keep the rats down. Not a bad existence for a medieval woman, considering the alternatives. She actually managed to die of old age.

But there was still that moment of stepping through the door, then turning and watching while masons sealed it up. Maybe she concentrated on subduing the cat. For the animal would have struggled in her arms, sensing a trap. It would have fought to get free, to get out through the smaller and smaller opening before the final stone was in place.

How could she do it? How could she want to do it in the first place?

For those few seconds, in that empty room, I knew. It had nothing to do with wanting or not wanting.

"No," I say now. "I don't want to eat my meals alone. I don't want to sleep alone." It's true enough. If not quite the truth.

Brian closes his eyes. Opens them. "Okay," he says. "Okay. I don't want to live that way either. And the thought of losing you —" He starts to tear up again. Swallows. Swipes pugnaciously at his nose. "I

can't do it without you, Daisy. I mean, I feel as if I've been shot out into space all of a sudden. And you're like planet earth. I need you to be there. I need to be able to come home to you. So please let me help you. I can't just sit back and watch you disappear into yourself. I have to try to break through your depression."

"I'm not depressed."

"Oh Honey, you *are*. You've got all the earmarks. And it makes sense. Did you know that one form anger can take is depression?"

Did I say I was angry? I don't feel angry. In fact, ever since coming out of the anaesthetic, I haven't felt much of anything. Just very still and quiet. As if I'm all by myself. Funny phrase. *All by myself*. What does it mean, literally? *Completely self-made*?

"It's a common problem, Sweetheart. But it won't just go away. You need to get help for it. And I'll help you find the help you need."

Help. Helping hands. Breaking down the sealed-up door to the room where I sit. All by myself. Because I'm depressed. Because I'm angry. Because I had minor surgery.

"Brian —"

"I know what you're going to say. That it's such a cliché. *Get professional help*. But you wouldn't hesitate if it was something physical, would you?"

"No, but —"

"Or if it was me? I mean, if I started acting like somebody you didn't recognize, wouldn't you worry? Wouldn't you care?"

Everything he's saying is making perfect sense. And he did do a minor in psychology. "Yes. Of course I'd worry. And of course I'd care. But —"

"Well, then you know how I feel."

All I know is I don't like this diagnosis. I don't want to be depressed. It's too clinical. Too convenient.

Brian's eyes are bloodshot. "Look," he says. "I'm in this for the long haul. Just know that much, Daisy. Even if you have to hate me for a while. Just know that I'm here. I can take it. And I will take it."

"Oh for God's sake, Brian. I don't hate you." And I don't. How could I? Up until three weeks ago, I loved him. Maybe I still do. And I just can't feel it. I did have surgery, after all. And that can do things to you. Or so I've heard. And maybe I do feel guilty, deep down. It

would stand to reason. So maybe I could use a little help. At the very least, it couldn't hurt. "Okay. I'll make an appointment with the campus shrink."

Brian drops his head. When he raises it, he looks at once terribly tired and terribly relieved. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls something out. I can't see what it is. It's so small he can hide it in the palm of his right hand. I keep looking at his right hand where it rests on the table, fingers curled around whatever he's holding.

"Look. Maybe this is crazy. Maybe the timing stinks. But you know me. The way I jump into things. So I have to tell you." He stops and looks down at his right hand. A blush actually begins to rise from the line of his beard, up past his eyes to his forehead. "I know we've always said we wouldn't legally marry, that we didn't need that kind of thing. Well, all of a sudden, I want the old-fashioned stuff. A wedding. Presents. Confetti. You in a dress. I want to take vows in a church. I want to make it official. So that if something happens to me, you'll be looked after. But it's more than that. I want to be your husband, and celebrate anniversaries with you, and get old with you and die with you. I want you to be my wife."

He opens his hand. I see a ring box, hinged and covered with midnight blue velvet. He puts both hands in his lap and sits back, watching me.

I don't know what to do. Or what to say. Three weeks ago, I might have burst into tears, then blubbered on about how this was what I had always wanted, deep down, and I had only said I didn't want it for his sake, because I didn't want him to know what a bourgeois little goop he was living with.

He's still watching me, his eyes brave, trusting. I'm going to have to do something. Make a gesture. And there are so many gestures I could make. I could get up and walk away. No. Too harsh. Too hurtful. Or I could stay sitting but not reach for the ring box. No. Too ambiguous. Or I could reach for it and pick it up, in order to hand it back to him, unopened.

The ring is white gold. The diamond is small but brilliant.

"And there's something else," Brian says. "When you're ready, and only when you feel you can, I want to talk, just talk, about having a child. A planned child. A child we could be ready for and look for-

ward to. Because believe it or not, that's what I learned from all of this. It threw me for a loop. It was the last thing I ever thought I'd want to do. But you know what? Brian Beagle wants to be a family man."

I should have seen this coming. Maybe I did. Because I'm not surprised. It fits. I can practically hear it clicking into place. I can see Brian as a father. A good father. One of the best. And nobody can say he hasn't put his cards on the table. Nobody can say he doesn't play fair.

Would it be fair of me to take the ring out of the box? Just to see how it looks?

It's very light in my palm. *Brian Beagle wants to be a family man.* What does Daisy Chandler want? What did Dame Julian want? Except it has nothing to do with wanting or not wanting, does it? It has to do with being.

So what *is* Daisy Chandler? Is she all by herself? Or is she one half of Brian and Daisy?

Brian and Daisy. When our friends call us that, does the phrase run together like one word? One flesh, as people used to say? Does Brian's scent breathe out from the clothes in my closet? When I read a book, are his eyes on the page with mine? When I write, do I hear the words dropping one by one as often in his voice as in mine?

I slide the ring from my right palm to my left. A room of my own. A child of his. Could the door to the room be shut? Sometimes. Could the child be persuaded not to bang on it? Sometimes.

The hand holding the ring, my left hand, takes over. It rises and offers the ring to Brian. He picks it up from the palm. The hand could still pull away. He slips the ring onto the third finger. The hand could still make a fist.

The metal is cool at the base of my finger for just a second. After that, I can't feel it. And it's only when Brian reaches to wipe my face with the kleenex I gave him that I realize I've started to cry after all. Maybe the tears are from all the feelings I used to feel. And all the ones I have yet to. But that I might still. With a little help.

"I guess this is the moment when the credits are supposed to roll," I manage to say.

"Now you're talking like an actor's wife." He leans across the table

to kiss me. Then he snaps the ring box shut. For such a small object, it makes a very loud noise.

•

Daisy! Daisy, wake up!

I had been sleeping for a hundred years. A century ago, somebody in a white mask, with eyes like Montgomery Clift, had looked at me upside down and said, "Hello, Daisy. I'm going to put you to sleep." Then he had started adding something to my IV bag.

I was lying on a padded table, wondering where Doctor Bernstrom was. Besides Montgomery Clift, there was a Chinese nurse who kept urging me softly to slide my "buttum" farther down the table. "You will feel an edge," she said delicately. "Like a hole. Yes. Thank you."

My feet were in stirrups, my *buttum* perched on something very like the lip of a cliff, and Doctor Bernstrom presumably waiting in the wings when I felt myself losing consciousness. *Now I lay me down to sleep*, I thought absurdly. Because there was nothing voluntary about it. I could feel my consciousness being taken away. Removed, bit by inexorable bit.

The day before, Doctor Bernstrom had told me, from behind a sheet draped over my raised knees, that there was "for sure something in there." I had to bite my lip. His accent was dangerously close to Brian's all-purpose stage Scandinavian.

"And now I will insert the seaweed into the cervix."

He had explained that a match-sized piece of compacted, dried seaweed would absorb my body fluids over night, thus dilating me slowly and painlessly. He had sounded oddly proud of the seaweed technique, as if he had invented it.

"Try to relax, please."

I couldn't. I was trying not to laugh, trying not to imagine the routine Brian would work up.

So, Doctor Bernstrom, what made you choose gynaecology?

Ja, vell, I was missing the fiords . . .

Just then the seaweed went in, and I had no trouble not laughing. "Sorry it pinches," Doctor Bernstrom said. "In a minute you will stop

feeling it.”

When I sat up I could still detect a tiny stabbing, as of a swallowed needle. Was the seaweed expanding already, drinking my fluids? Drinking *its* fluids? Could *it* register anything? Danger? Something as simple as thirst?

“Now let’s talk about the procedure,” Doctor Bernstrom said, once I had gotten dressed. I found myself studying his face, for some reason. It was a bony, homely face, the pale skin scrubbed pink. He reminded me a bit of Max Von Sydow.

“Tomorrow morning, I will first remove the seaweed, then insert the curette. I will scrape the inner lining of the uterus, then suction out its contents. It all takes about half an hour, and is practically painless.”

Scrape

“Can’t I have any anaesthetic?”

“Certainly. You can have a local anaesthetic, if you wish.”

Suction

“No. I mean, can’t I be completely unconscious?”

“We do not recommend a general anaesthetic for minor surgery. There is too high a risk.”

“What if I’m willing to take the risk?”

Doctor Bernstrom’s nose pinkened. “If you insist on a general anaesthetic,” he said crisply, “we will require you to sign a form stating that you understand the dangers involved.”

And absolving you, I silently added, *if I should die before I wake.*

“Daisy! Wake up, Daisy!”

Somebody had put a sanitary belt and pad on me. Every few minutes the Chinese nurse asked me to please turn on my side so she could look at the pad. Each time, she thanked me and asked me if I was in pain.

I wasn’t. Dr. Bernstrom had told me I would probably have cramps afterward. I kept waiting for them, bracing myself. Nothing. I was hungry. Thirsty. But that was all.

No, there was something else. When the nurse told me I could sit up, I looked out the clinic window and tried to put a word to what it was. Empty? No. Some other word.

"Daisy?" the nurse said. "Would you please read this pamphlet? It is very important that you follow the instructions. And your partner also."

The pamphlet was titled, *After Your D and C*. It told me that for two full weeks, I could take showers but not baths. I could use pads but not tampons. Most important, I was to refrain from having sexual intercourse.

Two weeks. *Poor Brian*, I thought automatically. Then wondered why I hadn't thought, *Poor me*.

Brian would be here soon. He had promised to take a cab from the film site, and get me home. The clock on the wall said ten-fifteen. I had been admitted at nine, put to sleep at about nine-thirty. It really had only taken half an hour. Brian might even be here already. If I stood up and turned around, I might see him.

I stayed sitting, looking out the window. There were other beds in the room, but they were empty.

Alone

There it was. The word I had been looking for. I was alone, truly alone, for the first time in weeks. No more constant presence I couldn't escape. No more feeling of being invaded. Occupied territory.

I was all by myself. For this little space of time. In this bare white room. On this narrow bed, with its taut sheets and plain grey blanket. When had I last slept in a bed this small, this simple? When had I last slept alone?

"Daisy? A gentleman is here to take you home."

•

Brian holds open the restaurant door for me, then takes my hand as we walk along to the print shop. It's going to be all right, I think. It's going to be just fine. I came close to cutting off my nose to spite my face, but the important thing is, I didn't actually do it. And now, things will work out. We'll come through this together and be better for it. Stronger. Closer.

Isn't that what everybody says? And everybody probably says it because it's true. Or maybe it's true because everybody says it. What

do I know? I'm depressed.

While we walk, Brian swings my hand back and forth, grinning, excited, happy. People on the sidewalk look at us and smile. Some of them probably recognize him from TV. Mothers bending to children. Family men loading groceries into the trunks of cars.

This is good, I tell myself. I'm glad I said yes to it. Or at least, that I didn't say no. Not saying no is pretty good for a depressed person. It's a step in the right direction.

We pass a church. Catholic. Our Lady of Perpetual Help. I wonder out loud why people are going in on a Saturday. "Wedding!" Brian says. "Hey — Let's have a big church wedding. Stained glass. Priest in robes. Organ music. The works."

"They don't just marry you these days. That's what I've heard, anyway. They send you on encounter weekends first."

"So encounter me, Baby," he growls, pulling me close and kissing me, a loud pop on the mouth. It's the first what-the-hell kiss he's given me in three weeks. I don't pull away from him. That's good. It's another step. We'll probably make love tonight. No. We will make love tonight. I'll see to it.

It's not a wedding going on in the church, I decide as we pass by. There are too few people going in, and they're too drably dressed. Confession, maybe.

I wasn't raised a Catholic, but the idea of confession has always appealed to me. Dame Julian confessed daily to a priest through her single window. What sins could she have accumulated, I wonder, in a twenty-four hour period, in a whitewashed room? With a cat? And what penance could the priest in good conscience have imposed, day after day? The two of them must have racked their brains.

Or maybe not. Maybe they were old friends. Told each other about their encroaching arthritis. Memory lapses. Hemorrhoids. Loved each other, perhaps. Touched hands over the stone sill. Maybe the priest even confessed to her. She was the cloistered one, after all, and he the one out in the world, with all its occasion for sin.

Sin is a strange word. Secretive and shameful, like a stripe on your underwear. *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is forever since my last confession, and this is my sin. Brace yourself.*

Would a priest forgive what I had done? He'd have to. It's his job,

to absolve sin. Grant absolution. Absolution sounds like flushing water. Like cleansing. A thorough inner scouring, to empty me of the sin of having emptied myself. And then what? How heavy a penance? How many rounds of beads on my knees before Our Lady of Perpetual Help, her plaster face pitying but immobile?

But who knows — maybe it would help. Maybe I should attack this thing, this depression, from all sides. Talk to a shrink. Confess to a priest. Go on an encounter weekend. Become a vegetarian while I'm at it.

We're at the print shop. "Sparrow colours!" Brian whispers in my ear, reminding me. I nod, smiling. I will decorate this man's home. I will be his immaculate, soft-spoken chatelaine. Who writes.

•

Beastie neither hissed nor kissed me when I came home from the clinic. Instead, she went into earthquake mode and stayed in it for days, only emerging from under the couch to eat or use her litter pan. For once, we took her seriously. We kept examining the walls and shelves for signs of shocks or tremors, but couldn't find any. Brian finally came up with a theory. "She knows we've found new digs," he said. "She senses a change coming. And cats hate change."

I didn't think that was it. At least, I didn't think it had anything to do with moving. But I didn't tell Brian what I was thinking. I just started wrapping things in newspaper and putting them in boxes.

•

Too red. Not beige. Too yellow. Not grey. Too blue. Not white. Too orange. Not charcoal.

The rack of prints is open like a big book in front of me. I've almost finished flipping through it when I find Van Gogh's *Wheatfield With Crows*. No sparrow colours here. The black of the crows is pitch black, not charcoal. The sky is acid blue, and the yellow wheat enough to make you squint. And then there's the road that stops in the middle of the field. Right at the spot where he shot himself.

This used to be my favourite painting. But it was almost ruined for

me when I wrote a breathless undergraduate essay which prompted my art history professor to take me in hand.

"Yeah, I know, I know," he said, fingering the pages I had typed on the new portable my parents had given me when I started at Guelph. "Everybody has this romantic notion of how Van Gogh died. They think he painted this marvellous symbol, a road ending in the middle of a field. Between the crows and the wheat. The eater and the eaten. They think he saw it all, in a big blinding flash. Saw that he was on the cusp between life and death. That he had done everything he could ever do. Had painted it all. Could only be a pale imitation of himself after that. And so, consummate artist that he was, he blew his brains out. He chose death over mediocrity."

I remember sitting in this professor's office, trying to will the warm blood down out of my face. He was practically quoting from my essay.

"But do you know what really happened? Well, you do. I know you do. I can tell from your bibliography. He had the gun with him to scatter the crows when they got in the way. And it probably went off by accident. Because he shot himself in the *side*, Daisy. Missed all his vital organs. Walked home. Didn't even bleed to death. Went septic and died in bed a week later of a fever."

I remember sitting there, my whole head on fire, desperately trying to think of something to say. Some retort. Something with which to shout down what I was hearing.

"All I'm saying, Daisy, is don't deify the guy. Pay attention to what he did. Not what he was. Because he was a nut case. Good painter. But a nut case."

I stand staring down at the painting in the print shop. Its uncompromising colours. The road ending. No. Not *ending*. Stopping. Deliberately, abruptly, ceasing to be.

"Hon?" It's Brian. "What've you got there? Oh. Okay. But it's not exactly sparrow colours, is it?"

He glances up and catches me staring at him. "I've picked something out. You want to come and see?"

I'm staring because he looks exactly the way he did that day outside the bus. When we held each other, laughing and kissing, and I felt the warmth of his skin through the cloth of his shirt. I remem-

ber a throb of wanting coming straight up through me, so strong it was almost pain. So strong I thought it might split me in two.

"Hello!" Brian says, waving his hand in front of my eyes. "Are you in there?"

"Yeah. I am. Sorry. Let's go see what you've got."

I follow him over to the rack he's been flipping through. My own stays open at *Wheatfield With Crows*. I'm aware of the painting as I walk away. I can almost feel it, as if it's throwing off heat.

What Brian has picked out is absolutely perfect. A pair of Japanese landscapes. Soaring mountains threaded with silver streams. Everything softened by grey mist. And in each, the requisite tiny human figure. A lesson in insignificance.

"We could hang them side by side over the bed," he says. "What do you think? And they've got some gorgeous frames. And mats. Come and see." He goes over to the wall behind the framing table and starts looking at the V-shaped samples hung there.

I don't follow. I just stand watching him. He's taken his jacket off. The store is still heated for winter. Brian is one of those men who looks marvellous with his shirtsleeves pushed up. I love the short strong line of his back. His neck is beautiful. So is the turning of his head. I take it all in, all the details. Memorizing them. I actually wish I had a camera.

shiver

Windows. As if something's hit them.

rattle

Now under my feet. Again. Tremor. Yes. Like the shuddering of some huge animal's hide.

I go quickly to Brian and touch his arm. "Did you feel that?"

"What?"

"I think it's a quake."

"No."

"I think it is. I felt it. I felt a tremor. So come on. We have to stand in the doorway."

That's what you do when there's an earthquake. You find a door-frame and stand in it. Brian taught me that. I run to the door of the print shop, which is propped open for air. I don't look back to see if he's following. When I get there I stand perfectly still, one foot in the

store, one foot on the sidewalk. I strain my ears for the sound of glass shivering again in the window frames.

This is what Beastie has been predicting. Ever since I got home from the clinic. She was just a little premature, that's all. Because it's here. Or it's coming. It might even be the big one the experts have been predicting for years. Good thing we're on street level.

A hand on my shoulder. Brian's. "Sweetheart. Come back inside."

"No."

"Honey. Listen. There's no earthquake. I've asked around the store. Nobody else has felt or heard anything."

"I did."

"It was probably just the wind rattling the windows."

"No it wasn't."

"Or a bird hitting them. Look. Daisy. You've had nothing to eat. You're probably feeling faint. So come on."

The hand tightens on my shoulder. I jerk away.

"Oh Baby, what is it? Will you please tell me what's *wrong*?"

I wrap my arms around myself and bend a little. I feel Brian's hand again. Tenderly, on the back of my head.

"Whatever it is, it's *ours*, Daisy. We'll work it out together. We can go for joint counselling. We can talk it through. We can do whatever we have to. You and me."

I look down at the space between my feet. Where I expect a crack to open up.

"I killed my child."

The hand on the back of my head becomes an arm. Around my shoulders. Trying to pull me close.

I brace my legs. Will not be pulled close. "I killed my child, and I'm glad I did it. I don't mourn it. I don't miss it. I don't want it back. I don't want to replace it. And if I have to kill another one, I will."

No crack opens at my feet. No windows rattle. The arm does not move from around my shoulders.

But its warmth becomes weight. Then its weight becomes heaviness. And we both know it is only a matter of time before it falls.