New Stories About Old Flames

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The Black Rhinoceros

Smoke hangs in a blue-layered fog above her bed, beyond the fan's reach. A stack of videos from the library bookmobile—all *Wild Kingdom*—has toppled into the bowl of goulash. Her bed is her world, and it's a mess. She won't look at me. She blows the smoke toward the open window. I'm inclined to apologize for snapping at her over the telephone when she woke me up, but the smell in her bedroom, a noisome melange of sour sweat, spoiled food and dead ashes, holds me back.

"Do you realize it's two o'clock in the morning?" I say. I had to kiss my daughter awake and tell her to call me at Marion's if the squirrels frightened her again, and to please not call her mom. There was no need to give her mother ammunition for a new hearing.

Marion takes a drag on her brown More cigarette. "I don't give a damn what time it is," she says. "I want those pills. Tonight." She turns and studies me humorlessly. Her hair, set earlier today by the visiting nurse when she stopped in to replace the morphine patches, has fallen into a disarray of pewter spikes that sag limply into the pillow. The morphine undoes everything. Even her eyes, her most striking feature, bold oval instruments of surveillance, have sunk into the hooded shadows of her skull and taken on a feverish glaze.

"You seeing things again?" We do the pill routine every time she gets fresh morphine patches, which give her terrible hallucinations. Last time she swore she was on a ship. Every one of her men were there, including Tommy, "the Bastard," the son she hasn't seen or talked to in seventeen years.

Her visiting nurse and occasional cook, Kasia, a tall martinet from Poland, keeps the meds high on a shelf out of Marion's reach. A chart tracks what she takes. It's quite an assortment. Three kinds of morphine. Zoloft for elevating moods. Nortiptyline to help her sleep. Ibuprofen for swollen joints. Doss to soften stools. Diogoxin to slow her hammering heart. Kasia won't administer a lethal dose.

"Put on *Three Tenors in Concert.* Hungry? Of course you are. You were born hungry. You can finish my goulash."

"Do you know how much trouble I can get into over this?"

"See. This is what I'm telling you. It's always about *me me me.* That's how come you're alone in that goddamn bunker and I can't get any peace before I die."

"Marion." Why am I always defending myself to her? "I moved my files into the garage so I could write briefs at home and wait for the school bus. You know very well that's what turned the trick at the hearing."

"I know goddamn well what turned the trick was me. And I say Queenie can be alone for five minutes."

"I need to be home when Queenie gets off the bus. The counselor said the afternoons are the worst time. You know that. That's when teens get in trouble."

"You're too easy on her. Her mom's right about that. Letting her wear dog collars."

"Don't go there, Marion."

"Shit. Go home to Queenie. I'll get them out of someone else."

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I sit down on the porta-potty at the foot of her bed, avoiding her look of reproach. The fan that cools her morphine sweats raises goosebumps on my arms. Tonight feels different, as though some wronged ghost were haunting the bedroom. Lucky me. The closest thing to family Marion has left, I've inherited the honor of killing her. My own mother died of diabetes when I was in law school. Marion, my neighbor at the time, bought me a tailored suit for the funeral. Ever since the divorce, we've eaten dinner with Marion two nights a week.

At a recent custody review hearing, instigated by Queenie's mom, my pale-faced seventh-grader, her hand touching her exposed neck where she'd been forced for safety reasons to remove the spiked dog collar, pleaded with the

judge to keep her out of it. *You little traitor,* I was thinking, certain she'd defend our nights together during the school week, when Marion made an eleventh hour appearance. She had come in a taxi, burning up precious scrip she needed to make store runs, and whirred into the chambers in her motorized chair, a coat thrown over her nightgown. Her cherry-red lipstick was errantly drawn, and her hair still matted from the bed. *This man is the kindest father I've ever known,* she proclaimed. *He's just stingy with his affection.*

Queenie's mom flipped. She came to court dressed in what looked like sack cloth from Guatemala, her prematurely gray hair chopped close to the skull, a style that only increased the look of menace in her dark and heavy eyebrows when she assured everyone present: *That man is a dangerously negligent parent.* He allowed our 12-year-old to dye her hair raven black. And he lets her wear dark wine lipstick to school. (The Addams-Family-Goth-thing was in vogue with intellectual adolescents.) And he feeds her cheese pizzas. And lattes. And she has terrible periods and he just goes right out and buys her chocolate at Dilletante. The examiner chastised Queenie's mom. She blanched but this time kept stoically quiet, playing the martyr.

Marion has aged visibly in the last few weeks. She's grown frail. I'm not used to that in her. I'm used to a tall, bosomy, joke-cracking hellion who had half the male population in this pensioner's hotel stopping in for slices of pie. I dampen a tissue in her water pitcher and daub the cool liquid against her cracked lips. She turns her head as though my touch were painful. I look past the bed and out the window. The ivy covering the brick wall is slick with September rain. A drunk, one of the homeless who scour the Public Market for scraps after the stalls close, is pissing and singing in the alley two stories below. I shout at him to quiet down. He curses me and toddles off into the alley.

"At least they're company. Better than I can say for you lately." She re-applies cherry lipstick, her wobbly fingers smearing it at the corners. "I look good enough for God?"

"An absolute angel." I pat her lips again with the tissue.

"Don't you wish. I could put in a word for you. Maybe it's not too late."

I see them now. The bills she's hiding under the blue sling that keeps her right arm immobilized against her side. The latest tumor protrudes from that elbow, an ugly beehive of busy cancer cells. She knows I wouldn't dare move that arm. I'm quick, though. I slip the bills out from under.

One invoice is from Porcelain Dreams, Inc. out of Newark. These fine porcelain dolls, Marion assures me, will one day pay for Queenie's education. Easton Press, I see, is billing for another of the leather-bound classics Marion keeps ordering for the library she wants me to have, that she never had. This time it's *The Book of Virtues*, moral tales compiled by William Bennett. I'll send it back. To her final hour, she refuses to talk to her son, and yet, despite her bravado in court, she expects that with sufficient prodding I will one day see the light and, for Queenie's sake, repair the breech with her mom. I do a quick calculation. At seventy-five, with her payments fixed at thirteen dollars a month . . .

"Marion, do you realize you'll be a hundred and twenty before you're solvent?"

"Just shut up and find my *Three Tenors*."

The TV covers us in the Discovery Channel's flickering shadows. The camera follows a rare black rhino into tall grass while I sort through the junk on her bed, ostensibly looking for her CD, but really looking for her checkbook. As executor of her will I have an obligation to her debtors, and I mean to fulfill it even if she doesn't. I unfold a letter from People's Memorial Funeral Service.

"Is this what's got you so upset," I say, waving the gray envelope. The University Medical Center cannot accept the remains of Marion A. Campbell for research—the tumor is the disqualifier. She's being referred to the above-named service for cremation. Her last social security check, the letter explains, should be set aside to pay for the service.

"So that's it. No reason to wait any longer." Her chin juts bravely, but she can't hold the pose. Her final wish had been to donate her body to medical students. She relished herself a cold cadaver sawn open for their investigations. An odd wish, maybe, but an ardent one. Geraldine licks at her pewter spikes. Geraldine knows when her mistress isn't kidding.

"You said you couldn't die until you saw me happy." I intend this as a joke but it comes off sounding ungrateful and selfish, and I shamefully try to amend it. If I understand her mood correctly, there's no further reason to endure the ceaseless pain since my happiness has been designated a lost cause.

"I've decided that bastard doesn't need to know what happened."

"What are you talking about 'what happened'?"

"Nothing. Just give me the pills."

"I don't think we can do this without consulting Tommy. He's next of kin."

"You have my power of attorney."

"There . . . could be . . . a perceived conflict of interest."

"Cause I willed you all my junk? Shit!" Geraldine nuzzles her neck.

"Alright. Alright. Calm down."

"Don't talk to me like a child. I'm your mother."

"Marion. Does this have to do with Tommy?" She says nothing. "I love you, Marion. You know I do. But he's your son. I want you to tell me what happened between you and him." I've been trying to get this story out of her for seventeen years and the best she'd offer was *someday you'll know*. "I'll give them to you. I promise. If that's what you really want. But I want to hear about Tommy."

"Look, kiddo. There's things that happened, you have no idea." Smoke curls from her cigarette as her mind drifts. Geraldine nuzzles the sweaty nape of her neck. Miles across the room, the black rhinoceros on TV plunges into a eucalyptus grove, pursued from converging directions by the poachers and the conservationists with the camera.

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I start the coffee maker out in the kitchen. Out of long-standing habit, I wash and rinse dishes left greasy by the chore worker. The tiny combined kitchen and living room is so jammed with the heavy Mediterranean furniture sent a long time ago by her former lover, Andy, it's all Marion can do to get through in her wheelchair. The old guys'll be happy to take this stuff.

I find the spare phone in the closet amid the bags of Depends, plug it in, and call Queenie, waking her. "I'm okay, Dad," she says in her sleepy, grumpy voice. "No prob if you have to be late." The squirrels, with their little rodent feet skittering out of control across the roof, sometimes wake her up in a panicky fright. The recent onset of this problem roughly coincided, though the counselor looked dubious when I suggested this, with the cutting. The counselor says it's too soon to expect her to quit cold. We haven't had an episode in over a week, that I know of, but she seems to need the comfort of the razor's presence. The problem first surfaced when her mom found a six-inch razor cut on Queenie's back. Queenie said it was a Goth thing, a ritual, no big deal, everyone had to do it. For the first time in a very long time, her mom and I came to an agreement. This had to stop. Her mom insisted on

two months of complete isolation. No friends, no calls, no contact. I felt this was unreasonably harsh, and we got into it over that. I saw this as the sort of problem-solving-by-isolation she'd used to punish me for the indiscretion that long ago split us apart.

We're on thin ice, Queenie and I. Her mom called last week to report that she'd found new cuts below the belt-line where they wouldn't show. When I asked Queenie to tell me what was going on, I got the adolescent brush-off. It's nothing, Dad, leave me alone. Instead she turned to me and asked if she could spend school nights at her mom's house instead of schlepping back and forth. Her explanation: she wasn't permitted to bring her CD's and her boombox to school and she felt deprived without this entertainment the two nights during the week she slept over at my house. I asked Queenie to level with me. *Why do you want school nights at your mom's?* After all, we had a portable CD player at home. What I got was, *Don't be upset, Dad. But my stuff is at Mom's.* We were in for it now. What stuff? You have stuff at my house. She'd been saving the real ammo. *I didn't ask for this. You know, Mom told me how come you guys really split up.*

One thing Marion doesn't know, as I've been too ashamed to tell her, is what happened that night when Queenie's mom came home from a yoga class unexpectedly early. About Tommy, the Bastard, I do know a few things. I know, for starters, how Marion took Tommy away from his father.

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Tommy was an infant, Marion a teenaged mother working late shifts as a waitress. Dick, whom I met much later in life, a tall, rangy Canadian wood-cutter with a solid jaw and ruddy complexion, was a disappointed man whose dream had been to ship out with the merchant marines, instead he had knocked up Marion and, it being the late Depression years, did the best he could with odd jobs like moving furniture. The three of them shared a Murphy bed in the once fashionable but by then run-down Gatewood Hotel downtown. Their narrow studio lacked insulation and passed every sound along to the neighbors, so when Marion came home from her shift one night and caught Dick in bed with Fat Mary from the seaman's bar downstairs, Marion calmly made tea, packed bags for herself and the baby, called a taxi, woke the sleeping beauties, offered them tea, and after she'd quietly drained her cup, said in low tones so the neighbors wouldn't hear, *Go on, then. Off to sea where you belong.*

That night's hasty departure began a decade of grief for all concerned. Dick came and went in Tommy's life like a satellite. Full of gifts and promises when in town, pointless and unreachable when out to sea. Marion worked late shifts, but her mom demanded half her tips for night care, so she let Tommy grow up wild. When Tommy was twelve, a skinny slouch with his dad's bad temper but none of his rock-jawed good looks, he got into trouble with the law. Stealing. Marion had had enough. Without leaving a forwarding address, she took the boy to a military town in the deserts of southern California where she had a friend. In the years away from his father, Tommy got into more trouble with the law. The judge offered him the Navy or jail.

I've seen photos from those days. Tommy wore a goatee. His grin had a Mephistophelian cast and his skin was ghostly pale, as though he never came out of the ship's hold.

At the time of Tommy's induction, Marion, then thirty-eight, took a job bartending at the Carlton Hotel in Atascadero so she could live near the base. "I was tall, thin and stacked like a brick shithouse," she bragged. Tips were good. But she was lonely. One slow night she put coins in the jukebox and danced alone to Barbra Streisand singing "Funny Girl." The hotel's owner, Andy Holmes, a deep-chested retired opera singer who wore a dark beard like Pavarotti's, leaned over the jukebox. In his sexy basso profundo, he said, "You have the most gorgeous legs I've ever seen." If he was lying, she let him lie. That small lie, she claimed, gave her seven years of heaven.

Who can say what constitutes another's happiness? In the Carlton's honeymoon suite, Marion found hers. For a while. When Tommy rotated out of the Navy, he moved back to Seattle to find his father. "After all I'd done for the boy," Marion once said to me, shivering with ancient anger, " to think he preferred that good-for-nothing philanderer!" I remember responding, sheepishly, that maybe the boy's father had good points. She lashed out at me. "What do you know!"

Still waiting for the coffee to finish dripping, I examine the fruit bowl on the kitchen table. Made of handblown glass from Mexico, it's one of many gifts Andy sent Marion in a vain attempt to woo her back after she followed Tommy to Seattle. Marion likes its disfiguring bubbles, its *charming imperfections*, as she calls them. My idea of a gift, to thank Marion for her appearance in court—an appearance, I should add, that caused her much consternation, as she was not convinced my motives were sufficiently noble—was a signed

original print of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World* I ordered from a collector's agent. Though I'm aware that this image of the crippled girl's half-reclining pose, braced up, looking back at the grim ramshackle house far away across the open field, has become cliched, it reminded me of Marion and Tommy in a way I chose not to define too explicitly. I was sure Marion would be taken by it, in any case, and shower me with gratitude. Nothing doing. She had Kasia hang it in the bedroom, very near, in fact, where the meds shelf is now, but she never mentioned it again, as though putting it there were in some way a rebuke to me.

It occurs to me, as I pour weak-smelling MJB coffee into the Thermos, that Marion blamed Tommy for her loss of happiness. In a photo taken by the ever resurgent Dick at the Paradise Inn on the snowy slopes of Mt. Rainier, a whippet-thin Tommy, still sporting that demonic goatee, glowers at Marion while his arm crushes his new wife's tiny shoulder against his side. Marion, separated from Tommy by the wife, appears blowzy as she offers Tommy a look of such sorrow it would break my heart if I didn't know her better.

While I'm busy in the kitchen, Marion puts her CD on at high volume. With the Opera Theater Orchestra of Rome behind him, Pavarotti sets the glass bowl vibrating.

Marion wants me to find my Andy, his female equivalent, at which point presumably I will abandon the war for poor Queenie's affections. No-nonsense Kasia, Marion tells me, is my ticket. I can categorically say the Polish nurse is not the *sine qua non* of my happiness. When she commandeers Marion's bedroom, her smile is a thinly disguised demand for adulation. In bed, Kasia, who's pretty in a masculine way, can't climax unless she's riding on top. I include mention of the nurse only to suggest what it was in Queenie's mom I used to appreciate. To her credit, she loved me as she found me. *You are a little bunkered,* I remember she once said, *but small animals venture out in the dark.*

Marion calls out. "You lost, or what?" She reminds me not to put milk in the coffee. And will I please look in Geraldine's bowl and see if it needs filling? I lean against the door. Marion's got her face screwed into a grimace.

"You still planning to leave Geraldine with Kasia?"

"Know what she says about you? Hmm?" Her painted lips spread wide in a smirk. "Kasia says you're a bad lover. You don't cuddle. You're all action."

Marion wants me to snipe back. I don't see the point. My love technique hardly matters here tonight. But this is vintage Marion. She loves to get in the middle. What will I ever do without her? Geraldine stretches across the pillows, her tabby fur haloing Marion's pewter. "I better take her to the vet. She won't be happy with Kasia."

"What do you know about happiness?"

"I know you make me happy." I hand her coffee and settle on the potty.

"It's not the same. You never had an Andy." With that one word she drifts to somewhere far away and long ago. She tells me a story I've heard snatches of before, but never in this detail, with this clarity.

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Andy flew to Seattle from California, rented a limousine, and picked Marion up from the room behind the gas pumps at the rural general store she'd taken over from her aging father. Marion couldn't afford to close for the holiday. This once Tommy agreed to come over with his wife and run the shop and pump gas so Marion could have a few days off.

Andy drove her down the Oregon coast to Seaside. They hadn't seen each other in more than ten years. He'd hired a private detective, found her, called, sent gifts. With no result. She wouldn't go back. This time was different. Dick was out to sea, Tommy she hardly saw, and she was tired of being open for business seven days a week.

They walked the trail along the craggy bluff out to the point known as Tillamook Head. An abandoned lighthouse occupied a tiny rock island below the cliff. Marion, seeing how patiently the waves eroded the rocks, concluded that life needn't be an endless course of *Sturm und Drang.* I'm interpreting for her. She actually only mentions the waves.

They sat at the cliffhead until the evening sun expired in the Pacific. A chill breeze gathered dark bellied storm clouds. Hand in hand, they climbed back through the prickly Oregon grape to a grassy knoll they'd passed earlier. Gnarled spruce, bent almost double from long battles with the weather, protected them from the wind. They lay down in the lavender flowering lupines like a couple of teenagers. Soon the rain fell, but it didn't matter to the naked lovebirds making a new start.

That night, in Seaside, Andy noticed lavender stains on her white dress and wanted to buy her a new one. She said she liked it stained the way it was.

They went for dinner at a waterfront restaurant. The long sandy beach was deserted. The rain came lashing down in torrents. Marion treated to abalone steaks. It had been their favorite in the seven Atascadero years of heaven.

Marion breaks off her story and sobs in mortal pain. She pummels poor Geraldine until the cat moves to the window ledge. "Listen up, kid," she says when calmer. "Never put lemon on abalone steak. It toughens the meat."

"But what happened?" I say, peeved at the summation. "Things seemed to be going well."

She grabs the bedrail with her good hand and scoots higher against the pillows. "Don't ask. I had to go back, that's all. I had a feeling something was wrong."

Tommy, she discovered upon her return, hadn't opened the shop as promised. He'd gone fishing instead with Dick, who hired a guide to take them up the Ho River for salmon. Having missed the income from the busy holiday weekend, Marion fell behind on her payments to Shell Oil. In due time, they cancelled her shipments. Gas customers went elsewhere. She took a loan she couldn't afford. Andy offered to pay it off, but she refused his money.

Was it then, I prompt, that you quit talking to Tommy? When she doesn't answer, I keep needling. Did he know how tight you were on your bills? She lashes out. "Of course he knew." Finally, I speculate, he had his chance to go fishing with his father. Maybe there was nothing more to it than that. "Balls," she says. "They could have gone fishing any time. They wanted to see me ruined." Why? I ask, though I can see she wants the subject closed. What could have been in it for Tommy? I'm determined to chew on this. I've waited too long for this answer. Was it payback? For depriving him of his father? Or—she's giving me a hateful look—perhaps Tommy couldn't stand her being happy at his expense?

"There's much you don't know," she says. "So just keep your nose out of it."

She does something that shouldn't surprise me, but does. She likes to think she can still shock me, just a little. She tucks back her nightgown to expose her hip. "Remember that? I scared the beejezuz out of you when I first showed you my tattoo. You thought I was coming on to you. Admit it. Didn't you!"

"I thought you were drunk, that's all." I can't bring myself to look at the faded eagle.

This is how I remember that night. Marion had locked herself out. She was on the porch singing lines from Puccini at the top of her lungs when I caught up with her. I lived in the one-bedroom around the corner. I was in night school and the hotel had hired me as assistant manager, which meant I got free rent for keeping a set of keys. Marion invited me to stay for pie and coffee. I begged off. I had a tax law exam coming up. She held my arm. At least coffee. She laced it with Canadian Club.

She looked me dead level in the eye and said, You have something about you. What do I have about me? I wanted to know. A sadness, she said. Unusual in one so young. We talked about my mother's illness. She said, I'm very sorry, but you know what? I'm not your damned mother. See? Before I could protest, she'd slipped down her pants, peeled away a white slice of underwear, and pinched the flesh around the eagle. Mothers don't have eagles on their butts. I knew I liked Marion when she told me she had a son and she'd gone ahead with the tattoo on her hip after he begged her not to embarrass him by pulling her pants down in the shop.

Marion accompanied my girlfriend and me to the airport when we set off on a safari to Ngoron-goro Crater in Tanzania to celebrate my passing the bar. My girlfriend, who would soon become Queenie's mother by virtue of a failed cervical cap, thought I should cancel the trip. My mother's death had been so recent. Marion insisted I go. I needed a break from worrying, she said. It was probably a mistake. I was moody and snappish. I'm afraid I ruined the trip for my partner. She pushed me naked out of the tent one moonless night. *Let me in,* I pleaded, feeling lonelier than I'd ever felt in my life. *Not until you're willing to talk.* Standing about fifty meters away, a bull elephant watched me. *Go ahead, trample me.* I urged him on. It seemed easier to endure that than to tell her what I knew she wanted to hear.

The Discovery channel is still following the hunted black rhinoceros as it crashes through the brush in South Africa, probably what sent me down this memory lane. Poachers seek the valuable tusks. Conservationists interfere with the beasts rearing of their young in an effort to protect them. I remember watching a cloud of pink flamingos settle over the muddy shores of the lagoon when she told me I was going to be a father. It was evening, just before sundown, an hour or two before she would angrily push me out of the tent. We sipped tea under the tent's awning. A feeling of alarm came over me as I

watched the smaller animals crowd the lake to drink. I knew, from previous evenings, the predators would soon come down to drink and the little ones would scatter into the gathering night.

We went back inside the tent. The silence out there was punctuated by the crackle of dry brush, a muffled squeal, snorting, then silence again. Soon, through my knees—I was on my knees tense with listening—I felt the vibration of heavy feet. I doused the lantern. The soft cone of light, quite apart from drawing bugs, had offered a false sense of protection from a night I felt included me. Her hand reached for mine. She sought to reassure me. *It'll be okay* . . . . She was waiting for me to tell her what I thought we should do. I took the coward's course. I kept quiet.

x

I check the time. Queenie has to leave the house at six-fifty to catch her school bus. I don't like to think of her waking up and getting her breakfast alone. Our routines are too fragile. "I really should get home."

"You're no different than Tommy. Go. Go on, then."

I've never heard her say Tommy before, actually call him by name. Is she allowing him, the possibility of him, back into her heart?

I find her cordless phone under the covers and call Queenie. She's wide awake. She heard a scary noise. She went into the bathroom and used the razor we saved in the way a reformed alcoholic keeps a token can of beer. Yes, she admits, she cut herself again. "You said not to call Mom and I didn't want to bug you."

"I'm coming home. Right now."

"It's okay," she says. "Probably just the dumb squirrels. I can sleep now."

"Oh, honey. What are we going to do?"

"Dad, chill. How's Marion? She still going nuts on you?"

"We'll talk about this later. I'll be home in a little while."

Don't bother, are the words I hear as I turn off the phone, words that reopen a wound already knifed into me by the look on her face at the hearing. When her mother offered the judge her twisted version of catching me in an infidelity, Queenie's face fell. I, her father, I could see it in her expression, had betrayed her. She's since refused to talk about it.

"Marion. I want you to be honest with me."

"I don't exactly have time for lies, do I?"

"Do you miss Tommy?"

"You kidding?"

"But, don't you regret . . ."

"I told you. I never regretted anything in my life except leaving Andy."

"But he's your son."

"You're my son. You're the one I love." She won't look at me. Geraldine creakily returns to her spot high on the pillows.

"Something doesn't add up here. You throw Tommy out of your life. You throw Dick out. You throw Andy out. How come you don't throw me out?"

"I could never throw you out. You're my son."

I stand up, more agitated than I want to be. On the TV, the black rhino is one step ahead of the poacher's jeep. I want a swallow of coffee, find the mug empty.

"I'm sorry, Marion. I guess you shouldn't have counted on me. I gotta get home."

She lights up again and squints at me through the smoke. She strokes Geraldine so fiercely the poor cat escapes to the windowsill.

"Sit." She pats the bed beside her. "Just for a minute." I do as she asks. The empty mug bounces onto the tile floor. The handle breaks off. Marion dismisses it with a wave of her good hand. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone." She closes her eyes to blink back the tears. "Now you'll hate me, too."

"I could never hate you," I say impatiently. I take her good hand. Her hands are dry. I rub lotion into them as she composes herself. Geraldine is on her hair again.

"I lied to you." She rolls her head back to look at the cat.

"What lie? About Tommy?"

"What's the use. Hell with it. Go. I'll get Kasia to give me the pills tomorrow. Go on home. Take some chocolate for Queenie's lunch."

I call Queenie back, ask if it's okay if I'm a bit late. "Poor, Daddy," she says. "Should I let you sleep through breakfast?" The counselor explained that cutting, especially among girls, is a way of releasing difficult emotions.

I reach across her bed and restart The Three Tenors. Marion takes a deep breath. "It was so long ago, but I feel like it just happened." Her story drifts to the time before Tommy. Though I wish urgently to leave, I strain to sit still and not fidget.

It was a time of rationing, the mid-1930s. The Sprinkle boy, her date, the

son of a famous Seattle industrialist, wasn't up to siphoning gas through a hose. Marion was sixteen and still a virgin and refused to stay the night. The rich kid was too snobby to walk her home. They'd double-dated with another couple, who did stay the night, and a fifth wheel, the Land boy, a sycophant friend of Sprinkle's willing to do any favor. Marion arches her back and moans. "Jesus, it was awful." I ask her to go on.

The Land boy agreed to escort her home. He tackled her under the cover of the dark trees. "When I tried to get away, he smacked me with his fist. Keep quiet, he said. He pulled my pants down. He hurt me. He broke my membrane and I bled. It must have been thick. He threatened me. Told me all the awful stuff he'd do to me if I ever told anyone. I was scared shitless."

The second time she missed her period she knew the worst had come. She reluctantly told her mother, but no one else. Her mother, disbelieving the charge of rape, called her a whore, and beat her with a hairbrush. Marion fled to a sympathetic neighbor.

To allow time for things to cool off, the neighbor put Marion up at the apartment of a friend who was out of town and needed a housesitter. Frightened, lonely, Marion struck up a conversation with a man moving furniture next door, Dick Larson, an unemployed Canadian mill worker odd-jobbing to make ends meet until he could get his seamen's papers. That night she asked Dick to sleep with her. He said she was better than bannock and maple syrup on a misty morning in the woods. Not to spoil his adoration, she never told him of her condition.

Months later, to escape the rancor at home—her father, believing the rich Sprinkle boy to be the father, was furious at Marion for refusing his calls—she went out alone one night to catch a movie. While she waited at the streetcar stop, the Canadian woodcutter walked by. What happened next—what Marion says happened—sounds a little convenient, but I let her go on, not wanting to interrupt.

Dick asked why she disappeared. Rather than explain, she opened her coat and let her swollen belly speak for itself. "We have to get married," he said. If he was egotistical enough to assume it was his, she wasn't going to set him straight. "Who said anything about marriage?" she said. "I'm having this baby on my own." Then she went to the movie.

After the movie, they were waiting for her at the streetcar stop. Dick. Her

mother and father. "They agreed to it," Dick said. "We're getting married." The worst part, according to Marion, was her father's stricken look. He'd had such expectations. He'd so wanted her to marry the Sprinkle boy and not a husband who'd end up selling coal and groceries like he did. He still knew nothing about the rape.

They had a shotgun wedding before a Justice of the Peace. Soon, Tommy was born. Marion never told Dick Tommy wasn't his. She never told Tommy Dick wasn't his father . . . .

Marion lays her head back into the pillows. "I've done an unforgivable thing, haven't I?" Geraldine licks at her hair. Pavarotti sings a piece from Puccini about a man coming out from under a lie to claim his sleeping love.

I squeeze her rough hand. "You only did what a scared girl had to do." Any jury, hearing her *mea culpa*, would forgive everything. The shotgun wedding. The dramatic exit. The separation of the child from the man. The flight to California. The abandonment of happiness to stand in the way of Tommy's reconciliation with the man he knew as his father.

"I s'pose you hate me now, too. You should. I'm a terrible person."

I assure her I love her still. "You did nothing to be ashamed of. My God, Marion, you should have told me this before. Of course Tommy needs to know."

"You don't understand." Geraldine's nuzzling manages to calm her somewhat. She lights another cigarette. "I fibbed a little while ago. When I told Tommy I never wanted to see him again, it wasn't for the things he'd done. I'm not mean. It's just that when I'd look at his face, all I could see was my lie. I couldn't live with Tommy every day reminding me. Do you understand that?" The tears start again. "I took care of Dick in his old age. I made it up to him. But Tommy. He never knew why I took him away from Dick. He never knew. Oh, God, that's why he hates me." The cigarette falls, abandoned. I place it in the ashtray.

I want to hug her, but her brittle bones scare me. I content myself to hold her hand. "Tommy can be traced through the post office. We'll find him."

"Don't you listen to anything!" She lifts her head from the pillows. "I'm trying to tell you something. He loved Dick. He was crazy for him." She picks up the burning cigarette and takes a fierce drag. "If I tell Tommy what really happened I'll take away the only father he ever knew. Is that what you want?" Her

head drops back into the pillows. She looks exhausted.

I stub out the cigarette. Marion's eyes close and her breathing slows. I hold her good hand and I feel it relax in mine.

The TV camera has moved on to observe hyenas tearing into a mangled corpse. It's ugly. I can't watch, but at the same time I can't switch it off for fear the sudden silence will rouse Marion. I look away, but then I force myself to watch. The limbs are torn and scattered in the long grass, the stiff muzzles of the wild dogs coated with the blood of their feast, their eyes restless, not trusting the inexplicable light that reveals them. The earlier episode was less hideous, but sadder by far. The adolescent black rhino, its horn lowered, stood with its flanks heaving, approached on one side by the poachers, on the other side by the conservationists. The poor animal, unable to distinguish between the two, stood frozen with unexpressed rage and fear.

I watch Marion's laboring chest rise and fall. Her lipstick has smeared again. This time I leave it. I touch her arm, the arm with the tumor, lightly, so she won't know, but she'll know, somewhere inside, that this touch at least is not pain. Geraldine nestles deep into the pillows around Marion's head. The cat purrs and purrs. This time Marion doesn't shoo her off.

SUSAN PERABO

Reconstruction

The last thing Martin remembered clearly were the footsteps, and he remembered these only because they triggered in him, on a dreary cold night, an almost immediate sense of relief. They were the sounds, twenty years old now, of his three sons thundering down the driveway to greet him as he arrived home from work, the thwack of sneakers against pavement, the stampede, the promise of excitement. Martin had smiled, thinking of his children sprinting to welcome him.

Then he was tackled, crashed square in the face with something (a bottle?), kicked in the stomach, turned over and dumped out of his coat facedown onto the cold sidewalk.

"So this is what it's like," he thought. He thought it with great clarity, although he would not remember it later, would deny to himself that he thought anything, that he was conscious at all. But he was conscious. "So this is what it's like," he was thinking. And he wondered, briefly, if they would kill him, if his next sensation would be something cool pressed against the back of his head, or a shock of pain in the middle of his back, a blade with no fingerprints, or so many kicks in the head. And finally he thought of Gail—although this too he would deny to himself—and was disappointed to discover that even while facing possible death and certain injury his thoughts were as shallow and manipulative as any bitter and desperate man not facing possible death and certain injury. "She will come to the funeral . . ." he thought, as a boot connected with his rib cage. "She will sit with the children . . . ." Laughter, above him. Someone—was this possible?—said something