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THE RABBIT HOLE AS LIKELY EXPLANATION

By Ann Beattie April 4, 2004

My mother does not remember being invited to my first wedding. This comes up in conversation when I pick her up from the lab, where blood has been drawn to see how she's doing on her medication. She's sitting in an orange plastic chair, giving the man next to her advice I'm not sure he asked for about how to fill out forms on a clip-board. Apparently, before I arrived, she told him that she had not been invited to either of my weddings.

"I don't know why you sent me to have my blood drawn," she says.

"The doctor asked me to make an appointment. I did not send you."

"Well, you were late. I sat there waiting and waiting."

"You showed up an hour before your appointment, Ma. That's why you were there so long. I arrived fifteen minutes after the nurse called me." It's my authoritative but cajoling voice. One tone negates the other and nothing much gets communicated.

"You sound like Perry Mason," she says.

"Ma, there's a person trying to get around you."

"Well, I'm very sorry if I'm holding anyone up. They can just honk and get into the other lane."

A woman hurries around my mother in the hospital corridor, narrowly missing an oncoming wheelchair brigade: four chairs, taking up most of the hallway.

"She drives a sports car, that one," my mother says. "You can always tell. But look at the size of her. How does she fit in the car?"

I decide to ignore her. She has on dangling hoop earrings, and there's a scratch on her forehead and a Band-Aid on her cheekbone. Her face looks a little like an obstacle course. "Who is going to get our car for us?" she asks.

"Who do you think? Sit in the lobby, and I'll turn into the driveway."

"A car makes you think about the future all the time, doesn't it?" she says. "You have to do all that imagining: how you'll get out of the garage and into your lane and how you'll deal with all the traffic, and then one time, remember, just as you got to the driveway a man and a woman stood smack in the center, arguing, and they wouldn't move so you could pull in."

"My life is a delight," I say.

"I don't think your new job agrees with you. You're such a beautiful seamstress—a real, old-fashioned talent—and what do you do but work on computers and leave that lovely house in the country and drive into this . . . this crap five days a week."

"Thank you, Ma, for expressing even more eloquently than I—"

"Did you finish those swordfish costumes?"

"Starfish. I was tired, and I watched TV last night. Now, if you sit in that chair over there you'll see me pull in. It's windy. I don't want you standing outside."

“You always have some reason why I can’t be outside. You’re afraid of the bees, aren’t you? After that bee stung your toe when you were raking, you got desperate about yellow jackets—that’s what they’re called. You shouldn’t have had on sandals when you were raking. Wear your hiking boots when you rake leaves, if you can’t find another husband to do it for you.”

“Please stop lecturing me and—”

“Get your car! What’s the worst that can happen? I have to stand up for a few minutes? It’s not like I’m one of those guards outside Buckingham Palace who has to look straight ahead until he loses consciousness.”

“O.K. You can stand here and I’ll pull in.”

“What car do you have?”

“The same car I always have.”

“If I don’t come out, come in for me.”

“Well, of course, Ma. But why wouldn’t you come out?”

“S.U.V.s can block your view. They drive right up, like they own the curb. They’ve got those tinted windows like Liz Taylor might be inside, or a gangster. That lovely man from Brunei—why did I say that? I must have been thinking of the Sultan of Brunei. Anyway, that man I was talking to said that in New York City he was getting out of a cab at a hotel at the same exact moment that Elizabeth Taylor got out of a limousine. He said she just kept handing little dogs out the door to everybody. The doorman. The bellhop. Her hairdresser had one under each arm. But they weren’t hers—they were his own dogs! He didn’t have a free hand to help Elizabeth Taylor. So that desperate man —”

“Ma, we’ve got to get going.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You hate elevators. The last time we tried that, you wouldn’t walk—”

“Well, the stairs didn’t kill me, did they?”

“I wasn’t parked five flights up. Look, just stand by the window and—”

“I know what’s happening. You’re telling me over and over!”

I raise my hands and drop them. “See you soon,” I say.

“Is it the green car? The black car that I always think is green?”

“Yes, Ma. My only car.”

“Well, you don’t have to say it like that. I hope you never know what it’s like to have small confusions about things. I understand that your car is black. It’s when it’s in strong sun that it looks a little green.”

“Back in five,” I say, and enter the revolving door. A man ahead of me, with both arms in casts, pushes on the glass with his forehead. We’re out in a few seconds. Then he turns and looks at me, his face crimson.

“I didn’t know if I pushed, whether it might make the door go too fast,” I say.

“I figured there was an explanation,” he says dully, and walks away.

The fat woman who passed us in the hallway is waiting on the sidewalk for the light to change, chatting on her cell phone. When the light blinks green, she moves forward with her head turned to the side, as if the phone clamped to her ear were leading her. She has on an ill-fitting blazer and one of those long skirts that everybody wears, with sensible shoes and a teeny purse dangling over her shoulder. “Right behind you,” my mother says distinctly, catching up with me halfway to the opposite curb.

“Ma, there’s an elevator.”

“You do enough things for your mother! It’s desperate of you to do this on your lunch hour. Does picking me up mean you won’t get any food? Now that you can see I’m fine, you could send me home in a cab.”

“No, no, it’s no problem. But last night you asked me to drop you at the hairdresser. Wasn’t that where you wanted to go?”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s today.”

“Yes. The appointment is in fifteen minutes. With Eloise.”

“I wouldn’t want to be named for somebody who caused a commotion at the Plaza. Would you?”

“No. Ma, why don’t you wait by the ticket booth, and when I drive—”

“You’re full of ideas! Why won’t you just let me go to the car with you?”

“In an elevator? You’re going to get in an elevator? All right. Fine with me.”

“It isn’t one of those glass ones, is it?”

“It does have one glass wall.”

“I’ll be like those other women, then. The ones who’ve hit the glass ceiling.”

“Here we are.”

“It has a funny smell. I’ll sit in a chair and wait for you.”

“Ma, that’s back across the street. You’re here now. I can introduce you to the guy over there in the booth, who collects the money. Or you can just take a deep breath and ride up with me. O.K.?”

A man inside the elevator, wearing a suit, holds the door open. “Thank you,” I say. “Ma?”

“I like your suggestion about going to that chapel,” she says. “Pick me up there.”

The man continues to hold the door with his shoulder, his eyes cast down.

“Not a chapel, a booth. Right there? That’s where you’ll be?”

“Yes. Over there with that man.”

“You see the man—” I step off the elevator and the doors close behind me.

“I did see him. He said that his son was getting married in Las Vegas. And I said, ‘I never got to go to my daughter’s weddings.’ And he said, ‘How many weddings did she have?’ and of course I answered honestly. So he said, ‘How did that make you feel?’ and I said that a dog was at one of them.”

“That was the wedding you came to. My first wedding. You don’t remember putting a bow on Ebeneezer’s neck? It was your idea.” I take her arm and guide her toward the elevator.

“Yes, I took it off a beautiful floral display that was meant to be inside the church, but you and that man wouldn’t go inside. There was no flat place to stand. If you were a woman wearing heels, there was no place to stand anywhere, and it was going to rain.”

“It was a sunny day.”

“I don’t remember that. Did Grandma make your dress?”

“No. She offered, but I wore a dress we bought in London.”

“That was just desperate. It must have broken her heart.”

“Her arthritis was so bad she could hardly hold a pen, let alone a needle.”

“You must have broken her heart.”

“Well, Ma, this isn’t getting us to the car. What’s the plan?”

“The Marshall Plan.”

“What?”

“The Marshall Plan. People of my generation don’t scoff at that.”

“Ma, maybe we’d better give standing by the booth another try. You don’t even have to speak to the man. Will you do it?”

“Do you have some objection if I get on the elevator with you?”

“No, but this time if you say you’re going to do it you have to do it. We can’t have people holding doors open all day. People need to get where they’re going.”

“Listen to the things you say! They’re so obvious, I don’t know why you say them.”

She is looking through her purse. Just below the top of her head, I can see her scalp through her hair. “Ma,” I say.

“Yes, yes, coming,” she says. “I thought I might have the card with that hair stylist’s name.”

“It’s Eloise.”

“Thank you, dear. Why didn’t you say so before?”

I call my brother Tim. “She’s worse,” I say. “If you want to visit her while she’s still more or less with it, I’d suggest you book a flight.”

“You don’t know,” he says. “The fight for tenure. How much rides on this one article.”

“Tim. As your sister. I’m not talking about your problems, I’m—”

“She’s been going downhill for some time. And God bless you for taking care of her! She’s a wonderful woman. And I give you all the credit. You’re a patient person.”

“Tim. She’s losing it by the day. If you care—if you care, see her now.”

“Let’s be honest: I don’t have deep feelings, and I wasn’t her favorite. That was the problem with René: Did I have any deep feelings? I mean, kudos! Kudos to you! Do you have any understanding of why Mom and Dad got together? He was a recluse, and she was such a party animal. She never understood a person turning to books for serious study, did she? Did she? Maybe I’d be the last to know.”

“Tim, I suggest you visit before Christmas.”

“That sounds more than a little ominous. May I say that? You call when I’ve just gotten home from a day I couldn’t paraphrase, and you tell me—as you have so many times—that she’s about to die, or lose her marbles entirely, and then you say—”

“Take care, Tim,” I say, and hang up.

I drive to my mother’s apartment to kill time while she gets her hair done, and go into the living room and see that the plants need watering. Two are new arrivals, plants that friends brought her when she was in the hospital, having her foot operated on: a kalanchoe and a miniature chrysanthemum. I rinse out the mug she probably had her morning coffee in and fill it under the faucet. I douse the plants, refilling the mug twice. My brother is re-thinking Wordsworth at a university in Ohio, and for years I have been back in this small town in Virginia where we grew up, looking out for our mother. Kudos, as he would say.

"O. K.,” the doctor says. “We’ve known the time was coming. It will be much better if she’s in an environment where her needs are met. I’m only talking about assisted living. If it will help, I’m happy to meet with her and explain that things have reached a point where she needs a more comprehensive support system.”

“She’ll say no.”

“Regardless,” he says. “You and I know that if there was a fire she wouldn’t be capable of processing the necessity of getting out. Does she eat dinner? We can’t say for sure that

she eats, now, can we? She needs to maintain her caloric intake. We want to allow her to avail herself of resources structured so that she can best meet her own needs."

"She'll say no," I say again.

"May I suggest that you let Tim operate as a support system?"

"Forget him. He's already been denied tenure twice."

"Be that as it may, if your brother knows she's not eating—"

"Do you know she's not eating?"

"Let's say she's not eating," he says. "It's a slippery slope."

"Pretending that I have my brother as a 'support system' has no basis in reality. You want me to admit that she's thin? O.K. She's thin."

"Please grant my point, without—"

"Why? Because you're a doctor? Because you're pissed off that she misbehaved at some cashier's stand in a parking lot?"

"You told me she pulled the fire alarm," he says. "She's out of control! Face it."

"I'm not sure," I say, my voice quivering.

"I am. I've known you forever. I remember your mother making chocolate-chip cookies, my father always going to your house to see if she'd made the damned cookies. I know how difficult it is when a parent isn't able to take care of himself. My father lived in my house, and Donna took care of him in a way I can never thank her enough for, until he . . . well, until he died."

"Tim wants me to move her to a cheap nursing home in Ohio."

"Out of the question."

"Right. She hasn't come to the point where she needs to go to Ohio. On the other hand, we should put her in the slammer here."

“The slammer. We can’t have a serious discussion if you pretend we’re talking to each other in a comic strip.”

I bring my knees to my forehead, clasp my legs, and press the kneecaps hard into my eyes.

“I understand from Dr. Milrus that you’re having a difficult time,” the therapist says. Her office is windowless, the chairs cheerfully mismatched. “Why don’t you fill me in?”

“Well, my mother had a stroke a year ago. It did something. . . . Not that she didn’t have some confusions before, but after the stroke she thought my brother was ten years old. She still sometimes says things about him that I can’t make any sense of, unless I remember that she often, really quite often, thinks he’s still ten. She also believes that I’m sixty. I mean, she thinks I’m only fourteen years younger than she is! And, to her, that’s proof that my father had another family. Our family was an afterthought, my father had had another family, and I’m a child of the first marriage. I’m sixty years old, whereas she herself was only seventy-four when she had the stroke and fell over on the golf course.”

The therapist nods.

“In any case, my brother is forty-four—about to be forty-five—and lately it’s all she’ll talk about.”

“Your brother’s age?”

“No, the revelation. That they—you know, the other wife, and children—existed. She thinks the shock made her fall down at the fourth tee.”

“Were your parents happily married?”

“I’ve shown her my baby album and said, ‘If I was some other family’s child, then what is this?’ And she says, ‘More of your father’s chicanery.’ That is the exact word she uses. The thing is, I am not sixty. I’ll be fifty-one next week.”

“It’s difficult, having someone dependent upon us, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes. But that’s because she causes herself so much pain by thinking that my father had a previous family.”

“How do you think you can best care for your mother?”

“She pities me! She really does! She says she’s met every one of them: a son and a daughter, and a woman, a wife, who looks very much like her, which seems to make her sad. Well, I guess it would make her sad. Of course it’s fiction, but I’ve given up trying to tell her that, because in a way I think it’s symbolically important. It’s necessary to her that she think what she thinks, but I’m just so tired of what she thinks. Do you know what I mean?”

“Tell me about yourself,” the therapist says. “You live alone?”

“Me? Well, at this point I’m divorced, after I made the mistake of not marrying my boyfriend, Vic, and married an old friend instead. Vic and I talked about getting married, but I was having a lot of trouble taking care of my mother, and I could never give him enough attention. When we broke up, Vic devoted all his time to his secretary’s dog, Banderas. If Vic was grieving, he did it while he was at the dog park.”

“And you work at Cosmos Computer, it says here?”

“I do. They’re really very family-oriented. They understand absolutely that I have to take time off to do things for my mother. I used to work at an interior-design store, and I still sew. I’ve just finished some starfish costumes for a friend’s third-grade class.”

“Jack Milrus thinks your mother might benefit from being in assisted living.”

“I know, but he doesn’t know—he really doesn’t know—what it’s like to approach my mother about anything.”

“What is the worst thing that might happen if you did approach your mother?”

“The worst thing? My mother turns any subject to the other family, and whatever I want is just caught up in the whirlwind of complexity of this thing I won’t acknowledge, which is my father’s previous life, and, you know, she omits my brother from any discussion because she thinks he’s a ten-year-old child.”

"You feel frustrated."

"Is there any other way to feel?"

"You could say to yourself, 'My mother has had a stroke and has certain confusions that I can't do anything about.'"

"You don't understand. It is absolutely necessary that I acknowledge this other family. If I don't, I've lost all credibility."

The therapist shifts in her seat. "May I make a suggestion?" she says. "This is your mother's problem, not yours. You understand something that your mother, whose brain has been affected by a stroke, cannot understand. Just as you would guide a child, who does not know how to function in the world, you are now in a position where—whatever your mother believes—you must nevertheless do what is best for her."

"You need a vacation," Jack Milrus says. "If I weren't on call this weekend, I'd suggest that you and Donna and I go up to Washington and see that show at the Corcoran where all the figures walk out of the paintings."

"I'm sorry I keep bothering you with this. I know I have to make a decision. It's just that when I went back to look at the Oaks and that woman had mashed an éclair into her face—"

"It's funny. Just look at it as funny. Kids make a mess. Old people make a mess. Some old biddy pushed her nose into a pastry."

"Right," I say, draining my gin-and-tonic. We are in his back yard. Inside, Donna is making her famous osso buco. "You know, I wanted to ask you something. Sometimes she says 'desperate.' She uses the word when you wouldn't expect to hear it."

"Strokes," he says.

"But is she trying to say what she feels?"

"Does it come out like a hiccup or something?" He pulls up a weed.

"No, she just says it, instead of another word."

He looks at the long tap root of the dandelion he's twisted up. "The South," he says. "These things have a horribly long growing season." He drops it in a wheelbarrow filled with limp things raked up from the yard. "I am desperate to banish dandelions," he says.

"No, she wouldn't use it like that. She'd say something like 'Oh, it was desperate of you to ask me to dinner.'"

"It certainly was. You weren't paying any attention to me on the telephone."

"Just about ready!" Donna calls out the kitchen window. Jack raises a hand in acknowledgment. He says, "Donna's debating whether to tell you that she saw Vic and Banderas having a fight near the dog park. Vic was knocking Banderas on the snout with a baseball cap, Donna says, and Banderas had squared off and was showing teeth. Groceries all over the street."

"I'm amazed. I thought Banderas could do no wrong."

"Well, things change."

In the yard next door, the neighbor's strange son faces the street lamp and, excruciatingly slowly, begins his many evening sun salutations.

Cora, my brother's friend, calls me at midnight. I am awake, watching "Igby Goes Down" on the VCR. Susan Sarandon, as the dying mother, is a wonder. Three friends sent me the tape for my birthday. The only other time such a thing has happened was years ago, when four friends sent me "Play It as It Lays," by Joan Didion.

"Tim thinks that he and I should do our share and have Mom here for a vacation, which we could do in November, when the college has a reading break," Cora says. "I would move into Tim's condominium, if it wouldn't offend Mom."

"That's nice of you," I say. "But you know that she thinks Tim is ten years old? I'm not sure that she'd be willing to fly to Ohio to have a ten-year-old take care of her."

"What?"

“Tim hasn’t told you about this? He wrote her a letter, recently, and she saved it to show me how good his penmanship was.”

“Well, when she gets here she’ll see that he’s a grownup.”

“She might think it’s a Tim impostor, or something. She’ll talk to you constantly about our father’s first family.”

“I still have some Ativan from when a root canal had to be redone,” Cora says.

“O.K., look—I’m not trying to discourage you. But I’m also not convinced that she can make the trip alone. Would Tim consider driving here to pick her up?”

“Gee. My nephew is eleven, and he’s been back and forth to the West Coast several times.”

“I don’t think this is a case of packing snacks in her backpack and giving her a puzzle book for the plane,” I say.

“Oh, I am not trying to infantilize your mother. Quite the opposite: I think that if she suspects there’s doubt about whether she can do it on her own she might not rise to the occasion, but if we just . . .”

“People never finish their sentences anymore,” I say.

“Oh, gosh, I can finish,” Cora says. “I mean, I was saying that she’ll take care of herself if we assume that she *can* take care of herself.”

“Would a baby take care of itself if we assumed that it could?”

“Oh, my goodness!” Cora says. “Look what time it is! I thought it was nine o’clock! Is it after midnight?”

“Twelve-fifteen.”

“My watch stopped! I’m looking at the kitchen clock and it says twelve-ten.”

I have met Cora twice: once she weighed almost two hundred pounds, and the other time she’d been on Atkins and weighed a hundred and forty. *Bride’s* magazine was in

the car when she picked me up at the airport. During the last year, however, her dreams have not been fulfilled.

“Many apologies,” Cora says.

“Listen,” I say. “I was awake. No need to apologize. But I don’t feel that we’ve settled anything.”

“I’m going to have Tim call you tomorrow, and I am really sorry!”

“Cora, I didn’t mean anything personal when I said that people don’t finish sentences anymore. I don’t finish my own.”

“You take care, now!” she says, and hangs up.

"She’s where?” “Right here in my office. She was on a bench in Lee Park. Someone saw her talking to a woman who was drunk—a street person—just before the cops arrived. The woman was throwing bottles she’d gotten out of a restaurant’s recycling at the statue. Your mother said she was keeping score. The woman was winning, the statue losing. The woman had blood all over her face, so eventually somebody called the cops.”

“Blood all over her face?”

“She’d cut her fingers picking up glass after she threw it. It was the other woman who was bloody.”

“Oh, God, my mother’s O.K.?”

“Yes, but we need to act. I’ve called the Oaks. They can’t do anything today, but tomorrow they can put her in a semi-private for three nights, which they aren’t allowed to do, but never mind. Believe me: once she’s in there, they’ll find a place.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Hold on,” he says. “We need to have a plan. I don’t want her at your place: I want her hospitalized tonight, and I want an MRI. Tomorrow morning, if there’s no problem, you can take her to the Oaks.”

"What's the point of scaring her to death? Why does she have to be in a hospital?"

"She's very confused. It won't be any help if you don't get to sleep tonight."

"I feel like we should—"

"You feel like you should protect your mother, but that's not really possible, is it? She was picked up in Lee Park. Fortunately, she had my business card and her beautician's card clipped to a shopping list that contains—it's right in front of me—items such as Easter eggs and arsenic."

"Arsenic? Was she going to poison herself?"

There is a moment of silence. "Let's say she was," he says, "for the sake of argument. Now, come and pick her up, and we can get things rolling."

Tim and Cora were getting married by a justice of the peace at approximately the same time that "Mom" was tracking bottles in Lee Park; they converge on the hospital room with Donna Milrus, who whispers apologetically that her husband is "playing doctor" and avoiding visiting hours.

Cora's wedding bouquet is in my mother's water pitcher. Tim cracks his knuckles and clears his throat repeatedly. "They got upset that I'd been sitting in the park. Can you imagine?" my mother says suddenly to the assembled company. "Do you think we're going to have many more of these desperate fall days?"

The next morning, only Tim and I are there to get her into his rental car and take her to the Oaks. Our mother sits in front, her purse on her lap, occasionally saying something irrational, which I finally figure out is the result of her reading vanity license plates aloud.

From the back seat, I look at the town like a visitor. There's much too much traffic. People's faces inside their cars surprise me: no one over the age of twenty seems to have a neutral, let alone happy, expression. Men with jutting jaws and women squinting hard pass by. I find myself wondering why more of them don't wear sunglasses, and whether that might not help. My thoughts drift: the Gucci sunglasses I lost in London; the time I dressed as a skeleton for Halloween. In childhood, I appeared on Halloween as Felix

the Cat, as Jiminy Cricket (I still have the cane, which I often pull out of the closet, mistaking it for an umbrella), and as a tomato.

"You know," my mother says to my brother, "your father had an entire family before he met us. He never mentioned them, either. Wasn't that cruel? If we'd met them, we might have liked them, and vice versa. Your sister gets upset if I say that's the case, but everything you read now suggests that it's better if the families meet. You have a ten-year-old brother from that first family. You're too old to be jealous of a child, aren't you? So there's no reason why you wouldn't get along."

"Mom," he says, breathlessly.

"Your sister tells me every time we see each other that she's fifty-one. She's preoccupied with age. Being around an old person can do that. I'm old, but I forget to think about myself that way. Your sister is in the back seat right now thinking about mortality, mark my words."

My brother's knuckles are white on the wheel.

"Are we going to the hairdresser?" she says suddenly. She taps the back of her neck. Her fingers move up until they encounter small curls. When Tim realizes that I'm not going to answer, he says, "Your hair looks lovely, Mom. Don't worry about it."

"Well, I always like to be punctual when I have an appointment," she says.

I think how strange it is that I was never dressed up as Cleopatra, or as a ballerina. What was wrong with me that I wanted to be a tomato?

"Ma, on Halloween, was I ever dressed as a girl?"

In the mirror, my brother's eyes dart to mine. For a second, I remember Vic's eyes as he checked my reactions in the rearview mirror, those times I had my mother sit up front so the two of them could converse more easily.

"Well," my mother says, "I think one year you thought about being a nurse, but Joanne Willoughby was going to be a nurse. I was in the grocery store, and there was Mrs.

Willoughby, fingering the costume we'd thought about the night before. It was wrong of me not to be more decisive. I think that's what made you impulsive as a grownup."

"You think I'm impulsive? I think of myself as somebody who never does anything unexpected."

"I wouldn't say that," my mother says. "Look at that man you married when you didn't even really know him. The first husband. And then you married that man you knew way back in high school. It makes me wonder if you didn't inherit some of your father's fickle tendencies."

"Let's not fight," my brother says.

"What do you think other mothers would say if I told them both my children got married without inviting me to their weddings? I think some of them would think that must say something about me. Maybe it was my inadequacy that made your father consider us second-best. Tim, men tell other men things. Did your father tell you about the other family?"

Tim tightens his grip on the wheel. He doesn't answer. Our mother pats his arm. She says, "Tim wanted to be Edgar Bergen one year. Do you remember? But your father pointed out that we'd have to buy one of those expensive Charlie McCarthy dolls, and he wasn't about to do that. Little did we know, he had a whole other family to support."

Everyone at the Oaks is referred to formally as "Mrs." You can tell when the nurses really like someone, because they refer to her by the less formal "Miz."

Miz Banks is my mother's roommate. She has a tuft of pure white hair that makes her look like an exotic bird. She is ninety-nine.

"Today is Halloween, I understand," my mother says. "Are we going to have a party?"

The nurse smiles. "Whether or not it's a special occasion, we always have a lovely midday meal," she says. "And we hope the family will join us."

"It's suppertime?" Miz Banks says.

“No, ma’am, it’s only 10 A.M. right now,” the nurse says loudly. “But we’ll come get you for the midday meal, as we always do.”

“Oh, God,” Tim says. “What do we do now?”

The nurse frowns. “Excuse me?” she says.

“I thought Dr. Milrus was going to be here,” he says. He looks around the room, as if Jack Milrus might be hiding somewhere. Not possible, unless he’s wedged himself behind the desk that is sitting at an odd angle in the corner. The nurse follows his gaze and says, “Miz Banks’s nephew has feng-shui’d her part of the room.”

Nearest the door—in our part of the room—there is white wicker furniture. Three pink bears teeter on a mobile hung from an air vent in the ceiling. On a bulletin board is a color picture of a baby with one tooth, grinning. Our mother has settled into a yellow chair and looks quite small. She eyes everyone, and says nothing.

“Would this be a convenient time to sign some papers?” the nurse asks. It is the second time that she has mentioned this—both times to my brother, not me.

“Oh, my God,” he says. “How can this be happening?” He is not doing very well.

“Let’s step outside and let the ladies get to know each other,” the nurse says. She takes his arm and leads him through the door. “We don’t want to be negative,” I hear her say.

I sit on my mother’s bed. My mother looks at me blankly. It is as if she doesn’t recognize me in this context. She says, finally, “Whose Greek fisherman’s cap is that?”

She is pointing to the Sony Walkman that I placed on the bed, along with an overnight bag and some magazines.

“That’s a machine that plays music, Ma.”

“No it isn’t,” she says. “It’s a Greek fisherman’s cap.”

I pick it up and hold it out to her. I press “play,” and music can be heard through the dangling earphones. We both look at it as if it were the most curious thing in the world.

I adjust the volume to low and put the earphones on her head. She closes her eyes. Finally, she says, "Is this the beginning of the Halloween party?"

"I threw you off, talking about Halloween," I say. "Today's just a day in early November."

"Thanksgiving is next," she says, opening her eyes.

"I suppose it is," I say. I notice that Miz Banks's head has fallen forward.

"Is that thing over there the turkey?" my mother says, pointing.

"It's your roommate."

"I was joking," she says.

I realize that I am clenching my hands only when I unclench them. I try to smile, but I can't hold up the corners of my mouth.

My mother arranges the earphones around her neck as if they were a stethoscope. "If I'd let you be what you wanted that time, maybe I'd have my own private nurse now. Maybe I wasn't so smart, after all."

"This is just temporary," I lie.

"Well, I don't want to go to my grave thinking you blame me for things that were out of my control. It's perfectly possible that your father was a bigamist. My mother told me not to marry him."

"Gramma told you not to marry Daddy?"

"She was a smart old fox. She sniffed him out."

"But he never did what you accuse him of. He came home from the war and married you, and you had us. Maybe we confused you by growing up so fast, or something. I don't want to make you mad by mentioning my age, but maybe all those years that we were a family, so long ago, were like one long Halloween: we were costumed as children, and then we outgrew the costumes and we were grown."

She looks at me. "That's an interesting way to put it," she says.

"And the other family—maybe it's like the mixup between the man dreaming he's a butterfly, or the butterfly dreaming he's a man. Maybe you were confused after your stroke, or it came to you in a dream and it seemed real, the way dreams sometimes linger. Maybe you couldn't understand how we'd all aged, so you invented us again as young people. And for some reason Tim got frozen in time. You said the other wife looked like you. Well, maybe she *was* you."

"I don't know," my mother says slowly. "I think your father was just attracted to the same type of woman."

"But nobody ever met these people. There's no marriage license. He was married to you for almost fifty years. Don't you see that what I'm saying is a more likely explanation?"

"You really do remind me of that detective, Desperate Mason. You get an idea, and your eyes get big, just the way his do. I feel like you're about to lean into the witness stand."

Jack Milrus, a towel around his neck, stands in the doorway. "In a million years, you'll never guess why I'm late," he says. "A wheel came off a truck and knocked my car off the road, into a pond. I had to get out through the window and wade back to the highway."

A nurse comes up behind him with more towels and some dry clothes.

"Maybe it's just raining out, but it feels to him like he was in a pond," my mother says, winking at me.

"You understand!" I say.

"Everybody has his little embellishments," my mother says. "There wouldn't be any books to read to children and there would be precious few to read to adults if storytellers weren't allowed a few embellishments."

"Ma! That is absolutely true."

"Excuse me while I step into the bathroom and change my clothes."

“Humor him,” my mother whispers to me behind her hand. “When he comes out, he’ll think he’s a doctor, but you and I will know that Jack is only hoping to go to medical school.”

You think you understand the problem you’re facing, only to find out there is another, totally unexpected problem.

There is much consternation and confusion among the nurses when Tim disappears and has not reappeared after nearly an hour. Jack Milrus weighs in: Tim is immature and irresponsible, he says. Quite possibly a much more severe problem than anyone suspected. My mother suggests slyly that Tim decided to fall down a rabbit hole and have an adventure. She says, “The rabbit hole’s a more likely explanation,” smiling smugly.

Stretched out in bed, her tennis shoes neatly arranged on the floor, my mother says, “He always ran away from difficult situations. Look at you and Jack, with those astonished expressions on your faces! Mr. Mason will find him,” she adds. Then she closes her eyes.

“You see?” Jack Milrus whispers, guiding me out of the room. “She’s adjusted beautifully. And it’s hardly a terrible place, is it?” He answers his own question: “No, it isn’t.”

“What happened to the truck?” I ask.

“Driver apologized. Stood on the shoulder talking on his cell phone. Three cop cars were there in about three seconds. I got away by pointing to my M.D. plates.”

“Did Tim tell you he just got married?”

“I heard that. During visiting hours, his wife took Donna aside to give her the happy news and to say that we weren’t to slight him in any way, because he was ready, willing, and able—that was the way she said it to Donna—to assume responsibility for his mother’s well-being. She also went to the hospital this morning just after you left and caused a commotion because they’d thrown away her wedding bouquet.”

The phone call the next morning comes as a surprise. Like a telemarketer, Tim seems to be reading from a script: "Our relationship may be strained beyond redemption. When I went to the nurses' desk and saw that you had included personal information about me on a form you had apparently already filled out elsewhere, in collusion with your doctor friend, I realized that you were yet again condescending to me and subjecting me to humiliation. I was very hurt that you had written both of our names as 'Person to be notified in an emergency,' but then undercut that by affixing a Post-it note saying, 'Call me first. He's hard to find.' How would you know? How would you know what my teaching schedule is when you have never expressed the slightest interest? How do you know when I leave my house in the morning and when I return at night? You've always wanted to come first. It is also my personal opinion that you O.K.'d the throwing out of my wife's nosegay, which was on loan to Mom. So go ahead and O.K. everything. Have her euthanized, if that's what you want to do, and see if I care. Do you realize that you barely took an insincere second to congratulate me and my wife? If you have no respect for me, I nevertheless expect a modicum of respect for my wife."

Of course, he does not know that I'm joking when I respond, "No, thanks. I'm very happy with my A. T. & T. service."

When he slams down the phone, I consider returning to bed and curling into a fetal position, though at the same time I realize that I cannot miss one more day of work. I walk into the bathroom, wearing Vic's old bathrobe, which I hang on the back of the door. I shower and brush my teeth. I call the Oaks, to see if my mother slept through the night. She did, and is playing bingo. I dress quickly, comb my hair, pick up my purse and keys, and open the front door. A FedEx letter leans against the railing, with Cora's name and return address on it. I take a step back, walk inside, and open it. There is a sealed envelope with my name on it. I stare at it.

The phone rings. It is Mariah Roberts, 2003 Virginia Teacher of the Year for Grade Three, calling to say that she is embarrassed but it has been pointed out to her that children dressed as starfish and sea horses, dancing in front of dangling nets, represent species that are endangered, and often "collected" or otherwise "preyed upon," and that she wants to reimburse me for materials, but she most certainly does not want me to sew starfish costumes. I look across the bedroom, to the pointy costumes piled on a

chair, only the top one still awaiting its zipper. They suddenly look sad—deflated, more than slightly absurd. I can't think what to say, and am surprised to realize that I'm too choked up to speak. "Not to worry," I finally say. "Is the whole performance cancelled?" "It's being reconceived," she says. "We want sea life that is empowered." "Barracuda?" I say. "I'll run that by them," she says.

When we hang up, I continue to examine the sealed envelope. Then I pick up the phone and dial. To my surprise, Vic answers on the second ring.

"Hey, I've been thinking about you," he says. "Really. I was going to call and see how you were doing. How's your mother?"

"Fine," I say. "There's something that's been bothering me. Can I ask you a quick question?"

"Shoot."

"Donna Milrus said she saw you and Banderas having a fight."

"Yeah," he says warily.

"It's none of my business, but what caused it?"

"Jumped on the car and his claws scratched the paint."

"You said he was the best-trained dog in the world."

"I know it. He always waits for me to open the door, but that day, you tell me. He jumped up and clawed the hell out of the car. If he'd been scared by something, I might have made an allowance. But there was nobody. And then as soon as I swatted him, who gets out of her Lexus but Donna Milrus, and suddenly the grocery bag slips out of my hands and splits open . . . all this stuff rolling toward her, and she points the toe of one of those expensive shoes she wears and stops an orange."

"I can't believe that about you and Banderas. It shakes up all my assumptions."

"That's what happened," he says.

“Thanks for the information.”

“Hey, wait. I really was getting ready to call you. I was going to say maybe we could get together and take your mother to the Italian place for dinner.”

“That’s nice,” I say, “but I don’t think so.”

There is a moment’s silence.

“Bye, Vic,” I say.

“Wait,” he says quickly. “You really called about the dog?”

“Uh-huh. You talked about him a lot, you know. He was a big part of our lives.”

“There was and is absolutely nothing between me and my secretary, if that’s what you think,” he says. “She’s dating a guy who works in Baltimore. I’ve got this dream that she’ll marry him and leave the dog behind, because he’s got cats.”

“I hope for your sake that happens. I’ve got to go to work.”

“How about coffee?” he says.

“Sure,” I say. “We’ll talk again.”

“What’s wrong with coffee right now?”

“Don’t you have a job?”

“I thought we were going to be friends. Wasn’t that your idea? Ditch me because I’m ten years younger than you, because you’re such an ageist, but we can still be great friends, you can even marry some guy and we’ll still be friends, but you never call, and when you do it’s with some question about a dog you took a dislike to before you ever met him, because you’re a jealous woman. The same way you can like somebody’s kid, and not like them, I like the dog.”

“You love the dog.”

“O.K., so I’m a little leery about that word. Can I come over for coffee tonight, if you don’t have time now?”

“Only if you agree in advance to do me a favor.”

“I agree to do you a favor.”

“Don’t you want to know what it is?”

“No.”

“It calls on one of your little-used skills.”

“Sex?”

“No, not sex. Paper cutting.”

“What do you want me to cut up that you can’t cut up?”

“A letter from my sister-in-law.”

“You don’t have a sister-in-law. Wait: your brother got married? I’m amazed. I thought he didn’t much care for women.”

“You think Tim is gay?”

“I didn’t say that. I always thought of the guy as a misanthrope. I’m just saying I’m surprised. Why don’t you rip up the letter yourself?”

“Vic, don’t be obtuse. I want you to do one of those cutout things with it. I want you to take what I’m completely sure is something terrible and transform it. You know—that thing your grandmother taught you.”

“Oh,” he says. “You mean, like the fence and the arbor with the vine?”

“Well, I don’t know. It doesn’t have to be that.”

“I haven’t practiced in a while,” he says. “Did you have something particular in mind?”

“I haven’t read it,” I say. “But I think I know what it says. So how about a skeleton with something driven through its heart?”

“I’m afraid my grandmother’s interest was landscape.”

“I bet you could do it.”

“Sailboat riding on waves?”

“My idea is better.”

“But out of my field of expertise.”

“Tell me the truth,” I say. “I can handle it. Did you buy groceries to cook that woman dinner?”

“No,” he says. “Also, remember that you dumped me, and then for a finale you married some jerk so I’d be entitled to do anything I wanted. Then you call and want me to make a corpse with a stake through its heart because you don’t like your new sister-in-law, either. Ask yourself: Am I so normal, myself?”

Banderas nearly topples me, then immediately begins sniffing, dragging the afghan off the sofa. He rolls on a corner as if it were carrion, snorting as he rises and charges toward the bedroom.

“That’s the letter?” Vic says, snatching the envelope from the center of the table. He rips it open. “Dear Sister-in-law,” he reads, holding the paper above his head as I run toward him. He looks so different with his stubbly beard, and I realize with a pang that I don’t recognize the shirt he’s wearing. He starts again: “Dear Sister-in-law.” He whirls sideways, the paper clutched tightly in his hand. “I know that Tim will be speaking to you, but I wanted to personally send you this note. I think that families have differences, but everyone’s viewpoint is important. I would very much like—” He whirls again, and this time Banderas runs into the fray, rising up on his back legs as if he, too, wanted the letter.

“Let the dog eat it! Let him eat the thing if you have to read it out loud!” I say.

"—to invite you for Thanksgiving dinner, and also to offer you some of our frequent-flier miles, if that might be helpful, parenthesis, though it may be a blackout period, end paren."

Vic looks at me. "Aren't you embarrassed at your reaction to this woman? Aren't you?"

The dog leaps into the afghan and rolls again, catching a claw in the weave. Vic and I stand facing each other. I am panting, too shocked to speak.

"Please excuse Tim for disappearing when I came to the door of the Oaks. I was there to see if I could help. He said my face provoked a realization of his newfound strength." Vic sighs. He says, "Just what I was afraid of—some New Ager as crazy as your brother. 'I'm sure you understand that I was happy to know that I could be helpful to Tim in this trying time. We must all put the past behind us and celebrate our personal Thanksgiving, parenthesis, our wedding, end paren, and I am sure that everything can be put right when we get together. Fondly, your sister-in-law, Cora.'"

There are tears in my eyes. The afghan is going to need major repair. Vic has brought his best friend into my house to destroy it, and all he will do is hold the piece of paper above his head, as if he'd just won a trophy.

"I practiced this afternoon," he says finally, lowering his arm. "I can do either a train coming through the mountains or a garland of roses with a butterfly on top."

"Great," I say, sitting on the floor, fighting back tears. "The butterfly can be dreaming it's a man, or the man can be dreaming he's . . ." I change my mind about what I was going to say: "Or the man can be dreaming he's desperate."

Vic doesn't hear me; he's busy trying to get Banderas to drop a starfish costume he's capering with.

"Why do you think it would work?" I say to Vic. "We were never right for each other. I'm in my fifties. It would be my third marriage."

Carefully, he creases the letter a second, then a third time. He lifts the scissors out of their small plastic container, fumbling awkwardly with his big fingers. He frowns in concentration and begins to cut. Eventually, from the positive cuttings, I figure out that

he's decided on the train motif. Cutting air away to expose a puff of steam, he says, "Let's take it slow, then. You could invite me to go with you to Thanksgiving." ♦

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