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Divide by Zero

By

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DEDICATION

Part 1 –

The Family

Summer *Storm Clouds, Hot Meal, Clear Day, Don't Leave*

Peter Peter gazed down at the golden pond of his drink. *I'm not my father* he told himself though his reflection wasn't sure. *I'm faithful, good and true. I'm not like him. I don't hurt people.*

He glanced up at the woman dancing on the stage. She was young and beautiful, unblemished and free. He watched her swirl, swinging her red skirt high above her knees. Mary had danced this way in their youth. She'd hung on his arm, long curls of hair brushing his face, filling his nose with the perfume of roses and sun. Her eyes shone like blades of new grass in a painting. Her lips brushed his, soft as petals falling in rain. But this wasn't Mary, and Peter wasn't his father. He wondered if his parents had ever known any dance but hurting and tears.

"You could try your chances with her, old man," said the friend at Peter's elbow. "See how she's looking at you?"

Peter shook his head.

"I mean, seriously, she's got all the moves. And look at those..." The friend fisted hands in front of his chest, but Peter shook his head again, making his ears ring. The conversation clattered too loud and jarring. He shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have let them persuade him. He should have stayed working, or gone home alone.

The friend of a friend from a table close by rocked a lazy hand. "Old Pete, you know, I rather think he likes..." Long fingers dangled in the air as words trailed away.

Not that Peter minded, but why should not wearing a ring and not dating mean people assumed he dated men? *Crazy world we live in.* He sighed, lifting the glass back to his lips. *Drink up. Get out of here. I shouldn't have come.*

The dance ended. The woman placed her mike back on the stand. She stared over the crowd then glided towards their table as if she'd seen Peter watching. Broad hips swayed under the bright red dress. Thick hair tumbled on bare shoulders. Her teeth were white, eyes green, but she wasn't Mary, wasn't who he wanted to see.

"I'm off." Peter coughed, slapped down his glass and added, "Got work to do tomorrow."

He wasn't used to this, the company, the drink, going out instead of going home. He had rules to keep him safe and lived by them. Now Peter staggered as he climbed to his feet, steadied himself, leaned over the table, then felt sick. Sour smells of drink, sour memories flooded in. He'd given up women long ago; perhaps it was time to give up alcohol too. It had been a mistake letting his friends drag him here, risking temptation in public. *Lead us not...* remembered prayer? He shouldn't let friends lead him away from his silent home, or drink lead to despair; no ring, no girls, no nothing the safest way.

He remembered the smell of his father's breath and the ringing sound of his voice. He remembered the sodden thump like wood on wet earth and his mother's whimpering cries like a kitten in distress. He remembered many things and thrust them away with straightened arms. Then he struggled to find the door.

"Don't leave." Was someone calling him back? His mother, but she wasn't here? Dreams and reality mixed and melded in his mind then tumbled free. Cold air should wake him.

Peter tugged the door awkwardly and stopped, trapped somehow in a gap between yesterday

and tomorrow, between outside and in. Warm air wafted behind—“Shut that door, man!” Cooler breezes blew ahead. He remembered hiding outside in the cold, under the picnic table in unmowed grass. A rotten plank, fallen free long ago, lay splintered and soft. He thudded it hard as he could against the ground. “Take that. Take that.” It didn’t drown the sound. Later his mother let the cat out; Peter crept through the line of yellow light spilling from the back door. He hugged her battered knees as he passed, smelling sweat and blood. Then he stepped around the hulking, snoring shape of his dad and climbed upstairs to bed.

In the cold air Peter remembered Mary and thanked the Lord he’d left before he could hurt her. No ring, no women; he’d seen his temper, watched those storm clouds over his head, and taken a hike. She was probably married to someone else now, had long forgotten him. She never answered his letters, never acknowledged cards or gifts he sent her for the lad. She’d stand in the kitchen cooking hot dinners for a stranger’s family tonight. Peter imagined the swirl of her dress—wide, fifties style, like the picture on flour packs—her face bright and free. She’d enjoy clear days of sunshine, sweetness and light. She deserved it, for sure.

And the boy, little Troy? He must be better off with another dad too.

Peter slammed his fist into the wall outside the bar, making his knuckles bleed. Not the first time; they were thick and rimmed with scars. A couple shuffled by, heading in for a drink. “Let’s get inside,” muttered the man. “Let’s get away from him.” But it was only a wall Peter hurt. Forever, for always, for mercy, Peter wasn’t his dad.

Storm Clouds Storm clouds gathered outside, *a suitable end to the day* Mary thought. At work, Pattie had pestered her with talk of the old people’s home. She’d moved her father over the weekend. Now she wanted to sort out Mary’s life. “It’s the perfect place,” Pattie said. “Gorgeous views on the drive down. You’d love it.” But Mary had too many memories of old folks ranged against walls like balls of yarn, TVs with silent pictures in the corner and radios squawking overhead. She’d promised her mother many years ago, she’d never put her in a home, and Mary wasn’t the sort to break a promise.

“Clear day promises,” her mother used to say. “Don’t you go breaking them when storm clouds gather.” So yes, Mary thought. It was singularly appropriate for clouds to be gathering tonight.

She stood cooking dinner in the kitchen, the small room cozy with the smell of meat in the oven and potatoes on the stove, windows steamed, fan whirring pointlessly. Three plates lay stacked on the table behind her with a tray waiting to hold her mother’s meal.

“Mary!” barked a sharp ragged voice.

Mary sighed. “Coming, Mother.” She left the oven mitts in a heap by the pan.

Warm bed, clean clothes, hot meals, and a servant ready to wait on every whim was all Mary’s mother wanted. Five more minutes to brown the pie and dinner would be ready, but Mother had picked up her bell and was ringing, singing raggedly in time with the chimes, “Mary!”

Oh, how Mary hated that bell; its tinkle, delicate as a small child’s toy; its authority louder than church bells on Easter morning. “Yes Mother, I’m coming.” The bell still rang.

Mary crossed the hallway with steady, angry tread to keep from hurrying. A key rattled and scratched in the lock as she passed. The front door swung wide and her newly grown-up son stood facing her in the worn out sneakers, holey sweatshirt and hip-sliding jeans of a newly qualified garage mechanic. “Troy! Perfect timing for dinner. Just let me go to Grandma.”

Troy made a grab for her arm. “We got to talk Mom.”

“Later.”

“No. Now.” He tugged harder, fingers like iron bruising her. Mary found herself steered back into the kitchen, still listening while the child’s bell, church bell rang from the other room.

“Troy, your Grandma...”

“Mom.” Something stern and urgent rippled in Troy’s voice, reminding Mary of his father, making her turn to face him. “Mom, I’m sorry, but I really can’t cope.” She watched his wide mouth form the words and forced her brain into motherly, helpful mode.

“Can’t cope with what Troy?” *What does he want? What does he need me to do that I’m not already doing? And what does Mother need?* Words circled silently.

Troy waved his hands like blackbirds baked in Mary’s pie. “Can’t cope with all this.” His arms enfolded kitchen, plates on the table, windows and the sound of the bell all into one as his gaze swept the room. “With Grandma. With you, always run off your feet. No time to talk, no time for anything. I might as well not be here.”

Mary withered under the weight of too many complaints, so much simpler just to answer the bell. But Troy leaned back on the kitchen door, trapping her in the room.

“I don’t know what you mean. You *are* here, Troy. I feed you. I keep house for you. I’m your Mom. I just don’t know what you want.”

“I don’t want you to *keep house*.”

Such a simple reply, it simply didn’t make sense. *Who else is going to do it?* Whatever had upset Troy, Mary didn’t understand. She’d missed some vital clue, some essential jigsaw piece. If a mother’s meant to sort things out, she’d lost some part of herself.

Troy was talking again, hands waving, explaining, complaining, words tumbling from his mouth in endless streams. They vanished in the ringing, ever-ringing of the bell. “I have to go to her,” Mary said. So Troy stood aside with a gentle smile—a smile so very like Peter’s—blank and sad.

So like Peter’s smile, Mary thought, clinging to memories of earlier days in her marriage. She walked around her mother’s room, calming her ragged breathing, relaxing her shaking hands with familiar tasks. She plumped cushions, changed channels on TV, opened pill boxes, adjusted the shades. Her eyes saw her mother slumped in the worn-out chair. Her ears heard demands. But her mind whirled through years and disappointments to the day Peter left. “Don’t go,” she’d called. “Peter, don’t leave.”

Suddenly, hopelessly, Mary realized what Troy’s smile meant. Ice dropped on her shoulders with remembered pain. “No,” she cried.

“Mary,” her mother ordered as Mary turned from her. “Mary!”

But Mary said, “Not now,” and hurried out the room, leaving her mother tinkling the hated bell.

She ran to the front door, pulled it open, rushed down the path, and stood helpless at the gate. “Troy, please. Troy, please don’t leave,” but it was too late. Red tail-lights disappeared into the first sheets of rain, storm clouds dropping their load. While her mother continued incessantly ringing the bell.

Hot Meal Earlier that evening, his work at the garage all done, Troy handed in his resignation with the same hand that picked up his pay. Storm clouds had gathered but the rain had yet to start—black skies, dry asphalt and electric air. He walked to his car, switched on the radio, and drove home.

Troy brought the vehicle to a halt outside the gate and stared at the path in front of him. So

many years invested here; if he tried he was sure his arms and legs would remember stretching up against the front door, tip-toes aching, one arm reaching for the knob while the other rapped on wood. “Daddy, let me in!” His father would pull the door wide open, catching him with strong hands wrapped around his waist and lifting him high. Troy would fly, then lie with his back to the ceiling, looking down on the hallway. Mom’s eyes shone brightly as she gazed up at him; her laugh happy and light, the smell of a hot meal cooking in the kitchen, the sight of the table laid out below as his father carried him. He remembered childhood’s king-of-the-world perspective; three plates, three knives, three forks; three of everything, always.

Troy remembered clear days playing on grass by the path as his Dad ran the mower. Warm air smelled of gasoline and daisies. Mom brought lemonade to the door, her print frock waving in the breeze. She’d sit on the step while they talked about engines and birds and the kids down the street.

Then came the day when Troy’s father walked alone away from the house; not a backward glance, spine ramrod straight under the shabby brown jacket, hair hidden under a hat, battered suitcase in his hand. Mom ran after him, barefoot, screaming, “Peter, don’t leave!” Neighbors opened their doors to watch. Troy gazed unseen from his tiny bedroom window while the world turned upside down. “So like your father,” people used to say. But his father was gone.

His mother’s face never smiled at Troy again, not even when he grew tall enough to look down on her graying head; no hands could lift him in the air.

Troy remembered walking up the path, solemn featured, solemn natured, his tiny palm held tight in his mother’s hand. He felt so proud to carry his mother’s shopping bags, just like a daddy would. He remembered measuring his height by whether he could reach the keyhole in the door. Mom gave him his own key eventually, so he could do his paper route without waking her in the morning. He felt grown up, felt visible.

Meanwhile his mother shrank and faded, a ghost taking her place. She came alive for his grandmother’s visits of course, fussing over cooking and furniture, proving she could cope on her own. She came alive if a workman knocked at the door; came alive for the mailman; in church. But Troy walked the path alone in long trousers, shiny shoes pinching his feet, tight collar around his neck, and lived with a ghost.

At school concerts Troy only cared for one face in the audience. He watched his mother’s outline in the dark, watched as she disappeared till all that remained was a rubber stamp in the passport of his life. At high school graduation they were told to wave to parents and supporters who’d brought them this far. Troy didn’t move, faced forwards, didn’t even blink. He knew his mother wouldn’t notice; she wouldn’t move either.

Still seated at the wheel of the stationary car, Troy sighed. It was time, he guessed. *Get it over with.* Storm clouds lent leaden weight to the scene ahead, everything two-dimensional, grass painted sharply on broken paving stones. He climbed out, legs grown leaden too, almost tripping as he bent to the gate. Walking up the path—*don’t step on the cracks*—he heard his grandmother’s bell. She lived with them now, relics of her home filling their old living room. Troy’s toys were banished upstairs when he was still a boy. Now like a thief in his own home, he sneaked around unseen, spending as little time there as possible.

The bell rang. Though he couldn’t hear her voice, Troy knew his grandmother was calling his mother’s name. Mom would rush to answer of course, her purpose in life.

When Dad left, Grandma became their metronome; a regular visitor, someone to be obeyed, someone to impress. She taught Troy to tie his tie straight, fasten buttons in the right holes, keep shoelaces from trailing. She told him to do his homework, though homework smelled of dad and

he hated it. She even phoned his mother each day to check on him. Grandma demanded perfection, while Troy's mother wilted like the flowers she planted in vases to show she cared.

When Troy was thirteen, Grandma was rushed to hospital. For days he studied school books by her bed, smelling the mixture of sickness and disinfectant and stale mashed potatoes, blinking under over-bright overhead lights. Then came the taxi, Mom helping Grandma maneuver an alien walking-frame up the path, Troy carrying her cases. A neighbor drove the rented van with furniture; then carried and squeezed furniture through the cramped front door. Gray dust from the living room's new wall mixed with the clean scent of wood in the darkness of the hall—Grandma's new room. The whole house changed in the space of a few short days. As Troy lifted his hand with the key, he still saw the marks where Grandma's wardrobe had gouged the wood and scratched his arm.

The bell still rang, the hated bell, as Troy slammed the key into the lock, opened the door and walked straight into his mother.

"We need to talk," he told her at once, though he'd planned perhaps to eat and discuss it slowly over dinner. He could smell a hot meal cooking.

When she pulled away, disappearing again, Troy grabbed his mother's arm. It felt so thin, so brittle; he was afraid she might break if she wasn't already broken.

They moved to the kitchen, bell still ringing, dinner still cooking, Grandma still waiting, impatiently. They balanced themselves between the smells of a hot meal and the disinfectants of Grandma's room. Meat pie, Troy thought; he wondered when his mother had stopped making those pastry leaves to decorate the top. Leaning back against the kitchen door, blocking her escape, he told her everything. Words poured out; why he had to leave; why he couldn't cope; how he loved her; how he hated to see her this way; how he knew he just had to get away. And he saw in her eyes, she wasn't there.

Was this why his father left? Did Mom used to disappear, even back then? Troy didn't remember.

When his mother said she had to go, had to answer Grandma's bell, Troy stood aside. He even smiled for a moment recalling the view from overhead: three plates on the table, three of everything, and his mother's laughing face looking up at him.

She crossed the hallway to Grandma's room, having never really left her. She'd never really been in the kitchen with Troy, never heard a word he said. Slowly Troy placed his front door key next to the plates—only two needed now—walked to the door, and went out.

Storm clouds lent a scent of ozone, raindrops in the air like mist dissolving and beginning to fall. Troy wasn't crying, not really, but he tasted salt in his throat. Dinner. That was it. He smelled his last hot meal, and it was too late.

Don't Leave *You're a stupid old woman Abigail. Say it,* said the voice in her head. *You're a stupid old woman.*

The other voice, the scratching, wretched voice, the wordless drone, tasted thoughts and tried to form them into words. "You're a... you're a... storm cloud on a clear day."

You're a stupid old woman.

If the television was on it would silence the sounds in Abigail's head; real voices, real words, real meanings; if the TV was on. And if she could get up from her chair she'd switch the TV on. She'd walk across the room, turn the knob, flick through channels till she found something worth watching; then go back to fit herself among her cushions. That's what she'd do. It was pointless but no more so than sitting, lolling in her chair, with spittle beginning to pool in the collar of her

blouse.

You're a stupid old woman.

"Storm cloud."

But now, because she couldn't move, and because the TV wasn't on, and because the voice in her head refused to be stilled, Abigail shouted the one word she still knew how to say reliably. "Mary. Mary!"

It was a sweet name, for a sweet, sweet child; fair-haired dancing girl who smiled like summer. The way Abigail's voice curdled it, the name sounded like swearing. *Cursed Mary, bedeviled Mary, martyred, mutilated Mary.* "Mary!" She spat. How she hated that scratching, ratcheting voice. How she despised it.

Abigail's daughter didn't answer of course; the room remained silent. So Abigail moved the hand that still obeyed, the one that could shift just far enough for finger and thumb to grasp the handle of the bell. She began to ring; hand rocking, side to side, peaceful in a memory of motion. Abigail rang and called for Mary. The sound of the bell soothed over her ratcheting voice, so she rang it again. Again, again; drown out the words in her head.

One day, Mary wouldn't answer. One day she'd leave, just open the door and walk away. Abigail would be alone.

"Mary," she called in fear, ringing her bell. *Mary, don't leave.* But that was just the voice in her head. The one in her mouth repeated her daughter's name harshly, bitterly, over again.

There was nothing wrong with Abigail's hearing though, and something changed; something in the quality of the air maybe, or a draft under her door. It felt like someone else entered the house besides Abigail and Mary. Her grandson Troy, Abigail thought. Perhaps he'd come home for dinner. Perhaps she'd catch cold from the draft if he didn't close the door. *Close that door,* said the voice in her head. "Winter storm," grated the sound from her lips, too quiet to hear. She rang her bell again.

Doors left open in a house that might as well be heaven or hell, or prison cell. Abigail rings her bell, ignored. Only the voice in her head replies, as always. *You're a stupid old woman Abigail.*

Don't leave, Mary.

When Mary came in at last, savory smells from a hot meal followed her, clinging to clothes, wafting from her hair. Abigail felt her blouse grow damp under her chin; drool puddling there at the thought of food to come. *Disgusting.* She grunted restless noises to tell Mary what she wanted. Mary said, "Yes Mother," as if she understood. Sweet Mary whispered like roses around the room, switched on the TV, changed channels, while Abigail's chin still dribbled untended and ignored. Abigail wanted her cushions moved. Mary moved the shades, adjusting the light. "Mary," said Abigail, but words wouldn't come. Till finally Mary came to the chair, wiping a handkerchief on her mother's wet chin.

Abigail would have thanked her if the ratcheting voice would obey.

Suddenly, over the sound of television, over Mary's 'Yes Mothers' and Abigail's rasping breaths, an empty silence froze, the absence of a noise that hadn't been noticed. A draft blew through the door again, change in the air, electricity from a storm firing bolts at the sky.

Mary jumped and hurried out the room, Abigail calling and ringing for her return. *Don't leave, Mary. Don't leave me on my own.* The voice betrayed her, rasping only, "Storm cloud. Storms. Clear day." Sweet Mary might never come back, and Abigail would die alone, one last hot meal in the kitchen left uneaten, the television channel forever unchanged.

She heard her daughter's anguished cries. She wished she could go comfort her, but this aged

body had betrayed her long ago. She wished she could speak, but had no words. Mary wasn't leaving Abigail, but Troy left Mary instead. Troy walked out, taking away the last of her daughter's hope. If only she could get up from her chair, if only she could walk, then Abigail would go to her daughter, wrap arms around her, and whisper in her ear, comforting words. She would have stroked her hair, her sweet pretty Mary, left all alone. Instead she sat and rang her bell, unnoticed.

"Storm clouds. Clear day."

You're a stupid old woman Abigail.

Clear Day "I got a letter today. Ten years, and she writes me. I knew her handwriting and I tell you, lad, my hand shook like palsy when I picked it up. I held it to my nose, I did"—Peter waved his hand by his face—"just longing for the smell of her, but it only smelled of paper. And I cried. Would you believe it, Son? I cried. Just a little, just enough to wet my eyes. I was crying for her."

The younger man stood in the doorway, hesitant.

"Ten years, and every card I sent, every letter, every check, not a single word, as if she barely wanted to believe I was alive." Peter shook his head. "I left her. Yeah, I know I'm at fault. I left her. But oh, how I loved her; how I missed her, these long, ten long years.

"If I could have smelt her on the letter, I'd've cried like a baby. I know I would. I loved her so much, can't you tell? I can see her now, like the day we met, hair like a cloud around her head. I remember her voice, like lavender on daisies, her hands like butterfly wings. Oh I loved your Mom.

"And that doesn't mean I didn't love you too, my Troy, old son. You were the apple of both our eyes. You were everything to us. But you can see how it was can't you? Well"—he thumped the table with battle-scarred hands—"Well, why should you?"

Peter shook his head then, trying to dash the memories from his eyes. He paced around the plastic-topped table, watched by his grown-up son. He gathered his thoughts into explanations while his son's eyes gazed unchanged.

"Never told you about my parents, your grandparents, did I? No, I wouldn't. But me, I remember the way they used to bicker and shout all day when I was a kid. They hated each other—can you believe that?—all my years when they were still there; nothing but one of them telling me the other was no good; either one, nothing right, nothing ever good enough. So I could never be good enough either, could I? Could never relax. It was my fault; that's what I thought. Can you imagine how that is?"

Troy hadn't reacted, hadn't relaxed either, hardly seemed to care. Still, Peter wouldn't tell him anymore; Troy didn't need that hurt, that fear, didn't need to wonder whose evil genes he might have inherited. Troy was all right.

"I couldn't do it to you, Troy. When I saw it in her eyes, when I knew we were going the same way, I had to leave. I couldn't do it. Not to you, Troy, not to my own son. I loved you too much."

"Couldn't do what?" Troy asked.

"Couldn't do what they did to me. Don't you see? I loved you both. I couldn't bear to lose you, but I couldn't destroy you either. You've got to understand."

Peter walked back to the table where he'd left the letter. "Yes, I wrote," he said to Troy's quizzical eyes. "I wrote every week at the start, then every Christmas and birthdays and Easter and holidays. You didn't get the letters did you? I sent money. I couldn't send presents. I didn't

know what you'd like. You didn't know?"

Troy shook his head.

"She should have told you. But I hurt her, Troy. It's not your mother's fault. You mustn't ever think that. Maybe she thought she was protecting you from me. Don't hate her Troy. Don't hate your mother. Please."

His son, still standing in the doorway, still leaning on the frame, closed his eyes.

"Anyway," Peter continued, shrugging off the moment. "I got a letter. Did I say? She says her mother, your grandmother made her write. She lives with you, right?"

Troy nodded sullenly.

"Mary says her mother kept looking at a picture on the shelf, one of us building sandcastles on the beach. D'you remember it? 1965? Sixty-something anyway. She says her mother kept looking at it, till Mary brought it over to her. Then she moved her hand—she only moves one hand now; that's what your Mom says—she touched your face and mine in the picture, just you and me. After a bit your Mom says she figured it out, like your grandmother was telling her to write me.

"I don't know." Peter sighed. "Women figure stuff out I suppose. It's just what she says, what she wrote." He felt like the world was running down with his words, time like sand disappearing through the spout.

"She says she doesn't know where you are, Troy. Doesn't she read? I told her you were here."

Troy turned as if he were bored of the conversation and Peter grabbed his arm.

"We have to go to her, Son. We have to go to *them*."

Troy shook his head, tried to shake his father's grip.

"I don't know what she wants, not really, I don't. But I know we have to go. You can't just leave your mother like this." When Troy looked back in disbelief, he added, "Yes, I left. I know. But you're her son. We have to go."

This time it was Peter handing in his notice, though he was the boss handing control to his second in command. Father and son packed cases, closed up the neat little house with its neat little rooms and neat little yard with dead little flowers. They loaded Peter's truck with luggage in the back and a tarpaulin tied down with knots and rope. Then they drove cross-country.

"How did you find me anyway," Peter asked as the radio died, yet again, in the middle of nowhere, in plains of empty silence.

"The phone," said Troy. "I kept trying directory inquiries till I found your name."

"That easy is it?"

"No. It wasn't easy, Dad."

"Well, thanks, I suppose."

Troy's car stayed behind in his father's garage, with boxes and tools, broken cups and furniture, and newspaper clippings. It had barely made the trip out. Troy seemed happy enough with his father in control of things now. He sat while miles wore away at the silence between them till conversation filled it with long-lost dreams.

They reached their old town, their old road, where neighbors stayed silent and invisible, hidden away in their homes. Peter stopped the truck in front of the gate. They walked down the path and heard the bell.

"Grandma's bell," said Troy, striding behind. "She rings it for Mom. All the time."

Peter almost smiled as the sun came out, bright shafts of light over grass and flower beds—clear day after all, where storm clouds had dogged the weary length of their journey.

The door opened at his first gentle tap. Savory smells drifted past, Mary's cooking, a hot meal for someone, not for him. Then she stood there, fraying, graying, and beautiful. She smelled of roses still.

"Mary." There was nothing more to say. Peter leaned his unshaven face into his wife's embrace. Her arms wrapped around him, voice smothered in comfort against his chest, tears running damply and sticking to the hairs behind his shirt. Over her head, as he turned her around, Peter saw his son watching. He still heard the bell.

"I'll go to her," said Troy. "Just don't leave while I'm gone." But his parents were going nowhere, locked in an unlikely embrace that seemed warmer than dinner and longer than all the years.

Fall

Agreeable, Nodding Head, Peter Piper, Fallen Leaves

Peter *Lead us not into temptation* Peter thought, looking down at his wife's sleeping form, curled tightly under the covers on the edge of the bed. She'd welcomed him back with open arms and a smile like the hottest day of summer. They'd talked all through dinner, gravy for two spread over plates for four; food ran out before the words. She'd stared at him as if she couldn't believe he was really there. Smiles pulled the wrinkles away from her mouth, stretching her cheeks, tearing back years. She touched him with fingers under the table, slid her knees to rest against his, tapped his shoulder every time she stood to answer her mother's bell. Troy had colored red with embarrassment and asked to be excused. Then evening fell, and Mary trailed fingers like silk on Peter's palm as they headed upstairs. And there, right there and then, it all fell apart.

"You've got to sleep somewhere I suppose," she said.

"I'll take the sofa."

"What sofa? We gave away the sofa when Mother moved in."

"Spare room?"

"Troy's room and it's full of his stuff."

A sudden gulf widened between them—expectation, revelation. "I'm back," Peter said softly, hoping to rekindle desire, but Mary pointed sullenly to the side of the bed by the wall.

"You sleep there, but keep your hands to yourself. Okay?"

He nodded, but couldn't sleep.

She seemed unable to bear the thought of sharing space with him. Yet she was still his wife; she'd never bothered to divorce him in all those years; and he'd never thought to wonder about that, how she couldn't have remarried if she'd never asked for divorce.

He drank her scent with long deep breaths as he leaned on his elbow over her, nodding head absorbing her sleeping beauty. The whole room smelled of Mary; *did it smell this way before?* The whole upstairs belonged to her while downstairs was sour with scents of sickness and age and Abigail, a change less agreeable, less welcoming. No matter; Peter opened his mouth drinking flowers and shampoo, tasting behind it that salt-sweet tingle of woman in the air. He wanted her, but shouldn't.

Turned on his back: *Don't touch. You haven't the right. Marriage gives you the right.*

Turned on his side: *Oh Mary. My beautiful bride.*

I'm not my father.

Peter's mother died when he was scarce out of childhood, still small enough to hide under tables and pretend he wasn't there, still young enough not to admit what he heard and saw, and scared enough not to fight. His mother never saw his wedding. She never knew Mary though he thought she might have liked her; might have noticed the bump perhaps as well. Would she have warned Mary off?—'Don't make my mistakes'—but marriage wasn't a mistake. They could still make it work.

Mary smelled of roses even back then. Her wedding dress perfectly disguised her pregnancy. Her arms were pink as rose-petals, bare to the sun, prettily padded with weight of the growing child. Her eyes gazed deeply into his when he lifted the veil to kiss her. Most of all Peter remembered the bliss of nights spent legally together, no fears of anyone pulling them apart, accusing them of sin. The child, their child, would be born in a perfect family, would bless and

be blessed. Peter's father would never know and could rot in hell. His mother would watch from heaven and rejoice.

Peter turned onto his back again with a sigh. The bed creaked but Mary didn't move. Was she really so deeply asleep or just ignoring him? She'd always turned towards him back then. His body stirred and Peter reminded himself, stern warning, *mustn't touch. You're on trial here.*

They saved up for a house after their marriage, living in Abigail's upstairs room till the baby was almost two—upstairs from Mary's mother, just like now. Peter had scrimped and saved—they'd scrimped and saved together—until, at last, they had a place of their own, a row-house, neat and tidy, with grass and flowers outside. He carried Mary up the path in his arms, the babe held tight in hers. They must have looked like some crazy children's toy or a balancing act. He held the key between his lips while Mary pulled it out—sharp metal taste—reaching to fit it neatly in the door. Then they tumbled inside.

Peter stretched an arm over his wife, remembering. He pulled her close till her curved back rested against him, knobby bones making ridges down his chest. He clasped her small clenched fists in one hand, moving the other one lower, stroking her nightdress, feeling her respond. His body began to move against her back, comfort and warmth, remembered joy, but suddenly she shuddered awake and rolled away. "Don't you dare touch me!"

"But Mary..."

"Don't you dare!"

Peter turned to the wall. His body ached for release that clasping fingers couldn't give. So long, so nobly, so rigidly he'd kept himself controlled.

"I never betrayed you Mary," he whispered to empty space. "Not really," but she was asleep again. He heard her breath, slow and steady, didn't dare turn—he yearned for her so. He talked in muttered undertones, to wide-flowered wallpaper grown ancient and gray, to memories of lying more comfortably in the same place in younger days. At least Mary had her friends at work to talk to. Troy had what he wanted—Mom and Dad both under one roof. Dear old Abigail had her bell. They had comfort perhaps. But Peter had left his life behind yet again, left friends, acquaintances, like fallen leaves. He was getting too old for starting over, too old to learn new ways, too tempted to ignore. *Marriage gives me the right. Leaving takes it away. Pay the Piper, Peter.*

Something thumped downstairs. Abigail needing help? Or Troy? Mary still didn't move. Somewhere between waking and sleeping, between past and future, memories and fear, and the troubles of everyday life, the pictures in Peter's dreams began to turn gray.

When the alarm clock rang he pretended not to hear it.

Agreeable Mary's friend Pattie waited for things to improve but they didn't, poor Mary getting quieter each day after Peter's return. By the water cooler she kept her eyes cast down, hands tense around the waxed paper cup, fingers fumbling with the tap, wrists trembling.

"You okay Mary?"

"Yip." She made a strangled sound; one Pattie knew well. It meant Mary wasn't all right at all, despite her nodding head.

"Things okay with that husband of yours?"

"Yip," even more strangled.

"And young Troy's alright?" Yip. "And your mother?"

That covered all the bases; everyone and no one was alright while Mary, agreeable, sweet, quiet Mary, had nothing more to say.

Pattie watched her friend walk away, thin body hunched beneath a head of graying hair, plastic cup cradled like a child, and business papers tumbling like fallen leaves from her arm. If Pattie stayed near the coffee machine, she'd catch Mary on her break for a longer talk.

They'd worked together in the same office for years, as close to friends as workmates can be, sharing gossip and lunch and occasional afternoon drives as years went by. Mary knew Pattie's Dan had put on too much weight; Pattie's father was too forgetful and they'd put him in a home; Pattie's son and his wife hadn't the faintest idea how to discipline their kids. Pattie in turn knew Mary's Peter had left ten years ago; her mother was a pain; her son a rebel; and suddenly Peter was back.

With little faith in fairy tales and much in misery, Pattie also knew Mary and Peter's new relationship was heading for the rocks. And she knew, beyond the faintest doubt, Mary's mother belonged in a rest home, just like Pattie's Dad.

Halfway through the morning Mary appeared hesitantly at the coffee room door. "Sit down," said Pattie, immediately dropping her slow pretense at filing. "Sit down; I'll get you a cup." She broke out the cookies too, her secret stash from their hiding-place under the counter.

They sat on opposite sides of a coffee-room table, cold metal chairs, warm drinks. Pattie stared at her friend's bowed head and twisting hands, seeking an opening. "Tell me," she said in the end. "Tell your Pattie now. Tell me all about it."

Mary sipped from the cup.

"Tell me, Mary. If you don't, I'll only guess and you know what a gossip I am."

Still Mary didn't speak.

Then Pattie held out a cookie. "Cookie for them—tastes better than a penny."

At last Mary raised her eyes from the plastic table-top. Her lips even twitched. It was a start.

Mary told Pattie slowly, over solemn choices of cookie—white chocolate or dark, chips or chunks—how everything at home was falling apart. "It's like you said, Pattie, there's no going back. You can't turn back the clock." Her husband, home after ten long years, seemed to want a wife and relationship long dead and buried. "Oh, I hugged him all right when I saw him," Mary said. "When he turned up on the doorstep. I hugged like there'd been no yesterday. But then you step back, and he's gray, and you're gray, and there's all those years gone by. I felt sick." Meanwhile her son was happy and sad and mostly, probably confused, as if he imagined his Dad had a magic wand and hadn't waved it yet.

Mary's mother—well, her mother was her mother. "Sits in her chair and rings her bell. Rings it morning, noon and night and I so hate that bell."

"And?"

"And Peter," Mary said, seemingly ready at last to complete her complaints. "Him. He sits in his chair and says, 'Hey love, d'you want to make another coffee?' as if I'm his slave. Thinks he's the Pied Piper or something, just has to play a tune and I'll do as I'm told. And Troy comes in; 'Hi Mom, Hi Dad, Hi Gran.' All's right with the world, and runs upstairs. Laundry on the floor. Stuff all over the place. Empty cups. Dirty plates."

Mary's voice grew higher, water pouring over the rigid dam of her silence. She seemed ready to cry and sucked back on her breath. "I thought it would help," she said, more quietly. "I really thought it would help having him around again. Now I feel like a nobody in my own home."

Pattie, friend, more than workmate, more than a gossip, placed an arm around Mary's shoulders. She had such thin shoulders, shaking shoulders, shuddering with struggling breaths. Pattie stood behind her with nothing to say, offering silent comfort—Pattie, the one who always talked too much—she knew she did. Then she picked up the coffee cups and plates and said at

least Mary wouldn't have to wash up at work. "So, what you doing Saturday?"

"Me? Nothing. Everything."

"You're coming out with me."

Mary looked up, confused.

"You're coming out with me," said Pattie, "and there's no getting out of it. I'm taking you for a drive."

"A drive? Where to? You're nuts."

Pattie agreed, since she hadn't even thought yet where they'd go. She said she'd pick Mary up at ten. Then she left, watching her friend's nodding head slowly droop over the coffee cup.

Nodding Head Abigail meant it to help, but she failed. She sat, stuck in the chair in her room, remembering how she'd hoped it would all turn out. If hopes were dreams and dreams came true, Abigail would be walking around the room cleaning up instead of molding like leftover bread dough.

She'd tried so hard to get her daughter back with her husband. She'd been so sure, and so right about where young Troy had gone. Then she'd been sure and wrong about how to make things right.

Of course, everyone thought Abigail was just the poor old, ancient old mother; drippy old dear with no idea what's going on; poor idiot shut in her room ringing her bell; annoying old thing. *There's nothing wrong with my mind*, Abigail thought, *and nothing wrong with my eyes. I see it all*. Not blind, not poor, just old, Abigail saw perfectly well what was happening to her daughter, darling child, ghost child, lost child, turning to stone. She wished she could help.

In the mornings Abigail heard the sounds of dawn, early traffic rumbling outside while Mary let her *lie in*. Her bed lay under the living room window where glass rattled with every passing car. She longed to sit up and peek, and wondered why people imagine the old just need sleep. But *lie in* means lie still, stay out of the way, out of sight, out of mind. So she'd listen to the morning sounds, and recognize the steps in the morning routine.

Mary's alarm rang first, beeping in the bedroom overhead, sharply stilled with the bang of Mary's hand. The bed would creak as her daughter climbed out, footsteps stumbling on the stairs, the sound of water gurgling in the kitchen, clattering cups, fridge door open and shut, faint scent on morning air of stale bedding, worn-out slippers and coffee.

Mary's feet would patter on the stairs again with her breathing too loud, a knock on Troy's door, 'Hey, wake up Kiddo,' footsteps stomping to the bathroom, running water. Mary's shower was as fast as Abigail's coughing for breath, then back downstairs to pans and plates, cooking breakfast for a hardworking son before he left for the garage.

Troy's footsteps were slower, heavier, more deliberate. The hissing of sprays punctuated Troy's shower, like rustling wind in the falling leaves of autumn. His feet tapped unsteadily on the stairs, front door open, paper snatched from the step, chairs scraped back from kitchen table as mother and son sat to eat. Abigail would listen, closed in her room, while Troy and Mary ate breakfast together, agreeably sharing the paper and rustling the news. The scent of coffee mingled with toast and bacon—*ah the sweet taste of salt*. Over it all that harsh background scent drifted from whatever miraculous product Troy used under his arms.

Mary would bring Abigail's coffee in bed. "Morning, Mother." Then she'd run out again to pack lunches, make Troy's bed, sort the washing. She'd help Abigail with those thick ugly stockings that glued themselves to her feet—elastic for phlebitis; Abigail remembered how Troy, when he was little, thought fleas were biting her.

When Troy was little. When times were happier. Abigail felt like the baby now, with Troy the man.

She'd never meant this to happen. When she came to stay she'd hoped to make life easier for Mary. "You can't travel all this way to help me morning and night." Abigail's proud head had nodded for emphasis. "You should let me live with you. I'll not take much space." But here she was, in the best room of the house, Troy's records and games banished up into his bedroom, the dining room squashed with easy chairs all jumbled around the table. They thought she didn't know.

Nothing wrong with my imagination, Abigail thought. Except, if only she'd imagined this right, it wouldn't have ended this way.

Troy left for the garage, Mary for the office. The creaking house grew quiet while Abigail watched TV, wishing she could change channel, pouring coffee with shaking hand from the flask on the table, eating cookies from the plate. By evening her hands wouldn't be able to move, except to clutch the bell. Mornings were brief freedom, with no one around to notice.

Eventually the bed upstairs complained again. Eventually running water splashed. The heater roared urgently. Abigail checked her watch, hands and wrists still mobile. How could Peter take so long to get clean?

Peter whistled—Peter Piper she called him—as he showered. He sang as he dressed. Then Abigail looked up to his hurried, "Hello there, Mother" when he poked his head through her door. He ignored the empty mug and plate on her table—not his job of course.

The microwave, strange modern machine, whirred and clanked and pinged. Knife and fork scraped on plate. Coffee reheated. Frozen food cooked fast. Peter's footsteps would stumble into the cluttered dining room, newspaper rustling in food-laden hand, and he'd sit—chair creaks and groans—to watch the portable TV on his own—*wouldn't want to watch with me.*

At lunchtime Abigail heard the key in the lock as stale air fled. Mary was home, doubtless overloaded with shopping, ready to refill cupboards, make lunch for three when it should have been two, or one. Abigail's hands were stiffening up again now, though she grasped and clawed the air to keep them moving.

If Abigail had imagined this right, Peter would still be away in another world, in another life. She'd be in a retirement home, Troy in an apartment, and Mary in a pretty little place of her own. Sweet Mary, pretty Mary, beloved daughter Mary. There'd be laugh lines around her eyes and a twinkle in her smile, and she'd visit every weekend where her mother would pretend to laugh with her and all would be well.

I'm just a foolish old woman, Abigail thought, *can't even make a single word make sense. Even my imagination's giving up.*

She clawed her solid fist again though the fingers barely came together. Then Mary came to pick up the cup and plate and switch off the TV so she could 'rest.' Abigail tried to thank her.

"Nodding head." Her ratchety, half-silent voice spat rubbish from her mouth. Mary looked on with weary eyes and sighed.

Peter Piper "Pattie's taking me out." Mary pulled her coat down from its hook behind the kitchen door.

"I can take you out."

"We're going for a drive."

"I can..." Peter paused, half-out of his chair. "Going where for a drive?"

"I don't know. Why would I have to tell you?"

He slammed the newspaper down on the table, scattering knives from the plates. “Shut up!” And Mary jumped back. She’d given him breakfast, cooked it, laid it out for him—he should be thanking her. Then his voice suddenly calmed. “I can take you out for a drive if that’s what you want.”

It wasn’t what she wanted. Mary retreated towards the door. *Be nice. Be agreeable.* “I know, Peter,” she answered in her sweetest, motherly, eternally patient voice. “I know. But Pattie asked me. Pattie’s my friend.”

“I’m your husband.”

“Ex.” She hadn’t meant to say it aloud. She knew it would set him off. Truth was, she hadn’t divorced him and she wasn’t quite sure what that meant.

Peter leapt to his feet, tipping paper like wind-blown leaves from table to floor. As Mary stumbled past he grasped at her. “Peter, Peter, Peter’s ex! Piper picked a peck.” His fingers tweaked her weekend skirt and her leg—they’d leave a bruise. “Picked a peck of pickled peppers didn’t he? Didn’t I?” He chased her around the tiny kitchen table, kicking chairs out the way.

“Peter, stop it!”

“Pickled Pattie.”

“Peter, stop!”

“Peter’s pecker.”

“Stop it, Peter!”

“Pick a pecker.”

“Peter. Not now.”

When Mary halted, Peter ran into her. She pushed him away and saw him stumble. Then he lifted his eyes to hers, all innocent and agreeable, like her son’s when he was small, like her son’s when he wanted something, like her son’s when they were arguing and he wondered if the world would fall apart again. *Poor Troy*, Mary thought. Didn’t he know the world would never stop?

Still, she couldn’t bear to hurt him, neither Peter nor Troy. Breathing heavily from the rush, hair damp from morning and breakfast, she stared at Peter and knew she was meant to love him. His head swayed and she wanted to make him nod. But Peter had been gone so long, too long. Now only a shadow remained, dark prophecy of her son. She saw who Troy would become someday perhaps, loved Peter for Troy with a mother’s love, but had no feelings of a woman for a man towards him now. He wasn’t her man anymore, just a picture and memory, lost hope.

“Maybe later Peter.” Peace offering.

Peter thumped down on the chair, face shiny with sweat. “You know, I’m getting sick of waiting, Mary.” His fists kneaded the paper.

“I know, Peter. I know.” She twisted the solid gold band she’d never stopped wearing. “I know. It’s just hard.”

“Yeah, well, it’s harder for me.” Peter smiled, looking down at himself, making his own jokes under the table where she could sense his desire. Mary didn’t care. It would be less *hard* if he’d go out and get a job. But Peter said he needed to get a life first. Mary had none to spare.

When the doorbell rang, she shouted goodbye to her mother, left son asleep and husband buried in breakfast and the paper, while she walked towards the sun.

Fallen Leaves They were silent in the car, Pattie driving, Mary clutching handbag and keys, as if she couldn’t remember the way to put one back into the other. Pattie sighed. There’d be a right time to talk, just not now. So she drove, steadily, not so long, while it felt like miles.

“How far are we going?” Mary asked. A voice at last!

“Not far.”

“Where to?”

“To Paradise.”

Then Mary laughed.

“Oh Mary,” said Pattie, her eyes still fixed on the road. “Oh Mary, it’s been so long since I heard you laugh.”

“Paradise?” Mary asked, laughter gone as suddenly as it had appeared. “Where on earth would you find that?”

Though the cynicism crept back into her voice, Pattie knew they were okay. It was almost time to talk.

The next town was only ten minutes away at most. Traffic lights announced it. A new subdivision of houses lay just past the remains of a farmer’s gate. Pattie drove through tree-lined streets that widened for elegant shops. Road signs pointed to changing lanes. Mary’s hands clenched tensely on her bag, but at least she’d put the keys away. Pattie smiled.

“You don’t like towns Mary, do you?”

“No.”

“That’s okay. We’ll be out in the countryside soon.”

Leaving the towers and glass-fronted shops, Pattie drove through fields and into the edge of a forest. For a while the road paralleled a country park with gray town buildings shimmering on the other side. Hills rolled lazily down to a duck pond resting in the dale. Fallen leaves lined the edge of the road with thick piles of brown. Sunshine dripped through red and gold, dappling the tarmac. “This is nice,” said Mary. Pattie told her it was called Paradise Park. “This is where we’re going?” No.

A brook burred gently, reflecting colors of fall. Then the view narrowed as forest thickened blackly around them. A sharp bend, roughly-surfaced bridge, and yellow lines led to another traffic light. Across the intersection, construction machinery hummed and buzzed furiously, flashing bright lights.

“New development?” Mary asked warily.

Pattie said they were building new college dorms. “Church dorms, or Christian dorms or something, for the University in town.” They drove slowly past a tiny church. A label proclaimed it *Church of Paradise*, and a sign shaped like a thermometer advertised the state of the building fund. “I think there was a village called Paradise once,” Pattie volunteered. “I guess the town must’ve grown and swallowed it up.”

“Nice little church though,” said Mary, smiling weakly.

“Yes.”

They turned across traffic at the next light, entering an area with a large stone sign proclaiming *Paradise Gardens*.

“Where on earth are we now?” Mary asked.

“Still driving,” said Pattie. “I think I might move here.”

Mary laughed, sounding more relaxed with every mile. The houses were big, new-looking, clean-painted with neat bright yards and green lawns. “These are way too big for you,” said Mary, but Pattie said she was looking at the town houses down the other end.

A green was dotted with small soccer players. They fluttered like fallen leaves forming patterns of shirts and shorts. An elementary school, Paradise Elementary, dominated a parking lot full of soccer moms waiting with minivans. And a row of neat town houses hid behind drying

hydrangeas and the dull pointed leaves of azaleas.

“Very nice,” said Mary, head nodding, as Pattie parked the car. They sat together imagining colors of spring, watched by the squirrel sitting atop the For Sale sign.

“Come and look.” Pattie opened her door.

“Why? I’m not moving anywhere,” Mary complained.

Pattie answered sharply that maybe she should. “Peter pipes a tune and you follow, Mary. Well, maybe it’s time you piped up for yourself once in a while.” Then she smiled. “I just want you with me while I look, that’s all.”

Mary seemed to relax, so Pattie continued to talk as they walked to the door. “You should think about it though. Like I said, there’s no going back. Even if Troy gets a place of his own. Even if your Mom—well, whatever, the house would never be the same. You got to move on. Keep moving on. It’ll keep you young.”

“We can’t afford to move.”

Pattie grabbed her friend’s arm. “Mary, how d’you know what you can afford?” she asked. “Your Peter had a fine house out there where he was living. That’s what Troy told you, right?” Mary nodded. “And a business?” She nodded again. “Right, well, he sells that house. He’ll get money for it. Sell the business. You buy yourselves a nice little townhouse here, and we’ll be neighbors.”

“Why would I want to live in a townhouse with Peter?” Mary asked, then added, “and Mother and Troy aren’t about to leave home either.”

“Buy condos,” said Pattie, laughing. “A little separation would do you all good. Two condos. Maybe three or four.” Crazy idea, but at least it birthed a smile.

Condominiums dominated the left side of the road, town houses on the right. Pattie watched Mary’s eyes widen with dawning of impossible imaginings. Then she heard the complaint she’d known she was bound to hear.

“But where would Mother live?”

“I’ll show you,” Pattie answered. “Later.” Luckily Mary didn’t ask what she meant, and the realtor Pattie had arranged to meet strolled around the side of the building, hand outstretched, ending the conversation. He said his name was Charlie. Black-haired, almond-eyed, he seemed young enough to be Pattie’s son. He almost tripped over a fluffy white cat scurrying past.

“Just ten minutes from work, for me and Dan, and *so* handy for Dad,” said Pattie as they shook hands afterwards. Charlie said there were several other places in the same price range. He could show them another time, perhaps if Pattie were to bring her husband with her. Pattie agreed.

“And you, Ma’am?” Charlie looked at Mary. Her face flushed suddenly warm and she stumbled back.

When Charlie left, Pattie dragged Mary across the street to the condos. “You could live downstairs,” she said. “Put Peter upstairs.”

“Oh yeah. Most agreeable. And I’d be his maid climbing the stairs every day to make his bed.”

“Well, at least you’d have separate beds.” At least Pattie and Mary could still share a smile, so the friendship stayed strong. *Scary when your friend’s strung out so tight.*

Back in the car Pattie told Mary they were finally near their destination. “Not the town house then?” *No, not the town house.* Wrought iron gates, green painted, had a sign welcoming them to *Paradise House*. Pattie parked the car in the asphalt semi-circle by the wide front door. It was an old people’s home.

“No way,” said Mary, clutching her purse to her chest. “No way! I won’t put my mother in a home.”

Pattie insisted she at least come and look, at least take a brochure back with her and show it to her mother. “And at least come in with me and say Hi to my Dad.” So they walked around together, two middle-aged women in a home filled with the old. Assistants and care-givers greeted and smiled, brochures were proffered, cups of tea and lemon cookies, while sunshine filled the airy blue room where Pattie’s father rested, his white head nodding, a white cat lying like slippers across his feet.

Pattie tried, too hard inevitably, to tell Mary how good the place was, and how her dad was happy. Mary just nodded politely and agreed to take a brochure.

“I’ll show her when I get home,” said Mary, but Pattie knew she wouldn’t. She took an extra one to give Troy if she saw him.

Winter

Moving On, Saying Goodbye, Let's Go, Fresh Start

Peter *I'm bound for moving on.* Peter sang the songs in his head, remembered the occasional bar in LA, occasional acquaintances trying to be friends. He'd thought he'd done all his moving on back then, leaving the Midwestern plains and lakeshores and towns. He'd said goodbye to wife and child long years before he could hurt them. He'd committed himself to his chosen fresh start, all work and no play, just existence, being safe. If he let himself go, went out when he had to for friendship's sake perhaps and drank too much, it was just once in a while. At least he never took anyone home with him and never hurt anyone. He wasn't his father. A quick and dirty grope while a dancer squirmed on his lap hardly counted as betrayal, just adult fantasy.

I'm bound for moving on, he thought, for moving on again. Mary wouldn't live with him now but maybe Troy would work at his garage and they'd still be together. Peter would keep himself pure just like before and wait for her. He'd close and lock the door on temptation and be a good father, belatedly, to his son.

I'm bound for moving on. But he had moved on, older now than his father had ever been. He looked in the mirror, shaved carefully around his new beard. *I'm really not my Dad.* He smiled, feeling something enormously freeing in the thought. He wanted to comb his hair differently and breathe the different air. If he was older and hadn't turned out like his Dad, perhaps he really could be safe.

I'm a good man. I'm a good husband, Peter thought to himself, swallowing the mint of toothpaste, feeling fresh and well-prepared. Though, of course, his wife didn't appreciate him.

Peter straightened his tie, adjusted his collar, measured the shape of his smile. *Put your life up for sale and move on.*

Moving On None of it would be this way if Abigail could help it, if she could tell them what she wanted, if she could make them listen to her thoughts and see what she meant.

It wasn't as if she was completely helpless. When Troy left home Abigail had known, deep inside herself, where he'd be. She'd stared, aiming with nose, eyes, head, ugly clawed fist with its useless, pointless fingers, at the picture on the shelf. She kept looking, kept pointing, kept struggling to speak, till Mary brought it over and sat with her. Poor Mary had nothing else to do except work and sit with her mother. Then Abigail pointed to Peter's face, struggling so hard to make her fingers move the way she intended. She pointed and fought her recalcitrant lips, trying to sound his name. Mary guessed, like a small child playing I-Spy. "Do you want this? Do you want that?" Till eventually she asked "Do you want me to write to him?" Then Abigail nodded, nodded till her head threatened to fall.

Yes, write him. Call him, she wanted to say. "Peter Pattie," was what came out. "Peter Piper. Move on."

So now old Abigail turned her nose to the brochure Troy left on her table.

"Don't worry," Mary said. "Can't think where that came from." She made to clear the glossy paper away but Abigail's fingers managed to hold it down. "Don't worry Mother. Don't fuss. I'll never put you in a home."

Abigail gazed into Mary's face. The pursed lips gave her daughter away. Poor Mary, doing her duty while trying to make it sound like what she wanted. Poor Abigail trying to live with and be grateful for whatever she was given. This wasn't home, or life. Abigail sighed, desperate for more, more for Mary and more for herself.

It didn't work of course. She tried to make Mary look at the brochure but it wasn't like the

family picture, not something Mary even wanted to see. All Abigail could do was clutch it in her fist when her daughter tried to tidy it away.

“I wish you’d let go,” Mary said impatiently. “I wish you’d stop worrying, Mother.” She had no idea.

Eventually Abigail decided to try with Troy. She heard his key in the door, footsteps in the hall, and she rang her bell.

“I’ll go, Mom,” said Troy, agreeable, the only peaceable member of the family these days.

“Oh don’t worry,” said Mary, predictably. Still Abigail kept ringing after Mary came, ringing, ringing till her daughter went out in dismay letting Troy take her place.

“Hi Grandma.”

Abigail put down the bell. Troy walked towards her and she tried to smile, willing her hands to pick up and hold the brochure, but they fell to her lap.

“Hi Grandma. What were you looking at? This brochure?” Troy leaned over, pouring sour garage-breath in her face, and picked up the leaflet.

Abigail struggled again to smile, building determination behind her eyes, tensing her reluctant, disobedient body like a wire. “Do you like it?” Troy asked, unfolding images, page by page, by her face. “Are you trying to tell me something?” Abigail nodded. That, at least, was something she still could do.

“D’you wish you could live there?” She nodded again.

“D’you want me to tell Mom?” More nodding head.

“You’re sure?”

Mary walked into the room, a shadow crossing the threshold behind Troy. Abigail met her with her eyes and nodded as fast as she could, a nodding-head toy keeping time on top of her neck. She tried so hard to shape her face into a smile, tried to say yes and didn’t even know what words came jumbling out. That jagged voice betrayed her at every turn.

Then Mary knelt beside her, holding pictures and words as they fell from Troy’s hand. Mary gazed into Abigail’s eyes—Mary, beautiful Mary. Slowly, struggling to force out one word, Abigail said, “Yes.”

“You really mean it, Mother?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

Abigail nodded and Mary sighed.

Was this a smile awakening Mary’s face? Perhaps a spring in her step? Could Abigail set things right for her daughter after all, make green grass grow?

Troy turned to wink at his grandmother from the door. She would have winked back if she could, but even if she couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t close a tear-gummed eye, she could still get her own way.

It was time to say goodbye, time to move on, time for a fresh start.

Saying Goodbye It didn’t take so long to arrange everything once the decision was made. Peter drove across the country to close his business and house. They sold straight away, impossibly fast. Mary wondered if he’d planned it all along, had the papers drawn up waiting for the day. Meanwhile Troy drove her along those same roads Pattie had taken. She signed forms for her mother at Paradise House, Troy checking the details, boy grown to man. Then they picked out a ground floor condo only streets away, backing onto grassland, Mary’s new home. Troy spotted a *for sale* sign at the garage when they stopped for gas. “Dad should make a bid,”

he said. “We’ll all be together.” It made perfect sense.

Could it really be so easy?

Father and son drove down together next weekend. Peter liked the garage or the location—Mary never asked which. They put down deposits on the business, two separate town houses doors from each other, and on Mary’s condo, signed away their lives. “Signed away our firstborn too.” Peter laughed, clapping Troy on the shoulder. They must have planned it all while Mary cooked dinner for her mother and herself. The money, all that impossible money, came from Peter’s business, booming when no family borrowed his time.

Mary’s mother seemed happy. Her lips still twisted, but almost smiled. Her clawed hand clutched Mary’s after the meal, but her fingers seemed almost gentle as they groped. White clouds of hair around Abigail’s head became a halo instead of an evil nest. The moving began.

Peter left first, to an empty house furnished bit by bit from both their homes. Troy drove Abigail and Mary to Paradise House, while Peter followed in a rented van. Mary’s mother’s room seemed to move with her, only the view from the window changing, grass and trees instead of cars. Afterwards Troy furnished his own little house with leftovers and details, while Mary packed boxes in rapidly expanding emptiness.

Now she walked through the rooms one last time. Floors, still carpeted, muffled her footsteps, but walls echoed every sound. Dust and spider-webs floated in the air, their taste coating her tongue. Sunbeams drew patterns like motion detector beams to scare intruders, as if the house already knew she’d moved on.

From the doorway of the main bedroom, her refuge for so long, Mary studied lines in the carpet where her double bed had stood, deep-seated dents from the feet of her big old dresser, scuffed footprints of chair, chest and stool. All this furniture was in Peter’s house now. It made sense, she knew. His house had more and bigger rooms than her condo. But memories molded in the furniture were hers, not her husband’s. Peter had left this house and all it held long years ago. It seemed strange bequeathing part of it to him.

She drew breath, pursed her lips and crossed her arms over her chest. *Time for a clean break, fresh start.* Boldly marching across the floor, cutting light beams that made no alarm, she stood where the dresser once sat, brushed cobwebs from the missing mirror and imagined her image there. She’d never again run her fingers through whorls and crevasses of smooth carved oak. The glowing timber would never again remind her of holes in her life. *Yes, Mary thought at last. It’s good.* Good to dump her wooden memories and start living again.

In Troy’s room Mary leaned against the narrow window, looking down over the path and small neat yard. Troy had played there as a tiny boy, running to his father, flying in the air to be caught by proud strong hands. They’d been a family then. Later, Troy played alone, with only an overworked mother to throw back the ball, grass growing too tall and Mary too weary to cut it. He’d lain in the sun, scraggly teenager with transistor radio playing on his chest. Then he’d sulked when she made him help with pulling weeds.

Lately Troy lived his life in this room. The marks of his absence were paint peeled from walls, threadbare patches where he’d lain on the carpet with his records, stray breadcrumbs and stains of strawberry jelly and blackcurrant drinks, stronger drinks as well. Mary smelled stale alcohol. She knew where Troy’s ancient TV had stood, and the bed, and the pile of dirty laundry. He’d moved everything to his townhouse, down the street from his father’s, to rooms Mary hadn’t even seen. Troy had grown into a man, a homeowner now. *He’ll have to do his own washing.*

Mary smiled sadly, trying to imagine how Troy’s little house must look. He’d taken his

furniture in the rented van, bought table and chairs for his dining-room from the classifieds while Mary leaned over his shoulder with her nose rubbing his hair. He'd taken a bookshelf from his grandma's room, one of grandma's sagging armchairs, and a bedside cabinet she'd used to hold cookies and coffee. That was it, in a two bedroom house. That, plus his father's brass curtain rods. Still, he did have a house. Just turning twenty, how many young men his age could say that? He had a home of his own and his mother felt proud.

Just for a moment, Mary waited at the top of the stairs. Suddenly weak, suddenly homeless and scared, she couldn't take the next step. She'd lived here so long, she thought, since the day they signed the papers, since Troy was two. She'd lived here through short-lived years of happiness, and stayed through long hard years of separation. She'd lived again through the shorter, even harder months back together. Now she had to choose between homeless and free. Freedom felt like a loose step on a stair where she might fall.

"You ready yet Mom?" Troy waited down below.

"Just coming Troy. Just saying goodbye."

Troy laughed because he had fewer memories, or fewer he cared to keep.

Downstairs Mary insisted on viewing each room alone, one last time. She said goodbye to the kitchen where they'd eaten through all those years, three eating together till Peter left, two till her mother came, and two again when her mother got too ill to leave the living room. The space looked bigger without table and chairs. Big enough to chase in. *Big enough to dance.*

Mary remembered the burbles of earlier joy. She saw Peter lift his son over his head, heard the giggles of a little boy's voice. She heard as well the echo of brittle laughter through recent months, Peter chasing, demanding what Mary couldn't give, Peter scornful, Peter cruelly insistent. No, she told herself. Listen instead to the quieter sounds of moments shared with her mother, Abigail ready to move to a home, seemingly content after all.

Mary said goodbye then to Abigail's room, seeing the ghosts of its previous incarnation behind the dust and dents of her mother's furniture. There—where her mother had kept the TV—Mary and Peter used to sit on the sofa, arms around each other, comfortably married. There—where her mother's bed left a layer of dust on the carpet—Troy used to play his games, wooden trains pushed noisily around grooved wooden tracks, plastic bricks built into concrete jungles, cardboard boxes filled with counters and cards and dice, cartoons on TV.

There, behind the coffee ring, was the stain from Troy's blackcurrant juice. Peter had laughed. "Boys will be boys," while Mary wept for their first major spillage in her perfect home—perfect marriage waiting for the dream to go sour.

The dining room—Mary had to look there too. She had to remember its former glory before all the furniture piled on top of itself when her mother came to stay. She remembered candlelit dinners enjoyed while Troy slept, late night meals with Peter, dinners with friends, bridge nights even, when they were young.

Mary remembered, sorted the memories, dusted them, and put them away. With no furniture to hide them in, she simply folded thoughts between her hands, tucking them into pockets beneath her clothes. Time to move on.

"Let's go," said Troy. They went.

Let's Go Troy and Peter hired the van from a company in the next town. They got a good rate because Peter had bought the local garage in the subdivision. Peter offered a deal on services in exchange. *So many deals.* Even Troy's house purchase came through faster because of his father's business. Troy's new job would be working at his father's garage, though it was

hard leaving where he'd trained all these years. They gave him a party his last day at work. Troy drank too much, and his best friend Todd brought him back sprawled on the seat of his car. Troy's last night in his childhood home was spent on the floor instead of bed. There was something ironically appropriate about it, Troy thought now, as he waited for his mother. "You ready yet, Mom?"

She wandered around rooms saying goodbye while Todd and Troy loaded the van with boxes and last bits of furniture, his mother's mattress—the bed had already gone to his father's house—kitchen table and chairs, the cross piece from the cupboards in Troy's bedroom. Boxes were stacked and tumbled, squeezed against each other to keep them from moving, numbered to protect against getting lost. Most of them would be delivered to Mary's condo.

Grandma moved the week before, her furniture gone too, making the new room a miniature of the old, same pictures on shelf and wall, same cups and plates on the same embroidered cloth. She was content, Troy thought.

Troy's father left a month ago, moving to his new house as soon as he took over running the garage. He seemed happier too, finally resigned to knowing his marriage wouldn't work. He'd offered to drive today but Troy said no. The condo was Mom's fresh start—she wouldn't want him there.

"What about you?" Todd asked of Troy as they finished loading the van. "How do you feel?"

"Lonely," said Troy. "Hungover. How d'you think?" He thanked his friend for his help, agreed to meet for a drink sometime soon. "Call me." Then he waved goodbye.

Troy's mother drifted downstairs, meandering like a ghost through the remaining rooms, eyes lost in the past.

"Come on, Mum. Let's go."

Finally she let Troy take her arm and help her into the van. "It's so high." She giggled like a child. Troy felt cold, wondering if, like Grandma, she'd turn into a helpless dependent one day.

Ghosts of past and future met on the path: Troy's father in the old brown coat, mother barefoot and running, Troy reaching for the lock. If he listened closely enough he might hear Grandma's bell, quietly demanding, or warning, trying to deliver a message words couldn't spell. The ghosts passed through him now and moved on, taking nothing away with them. Another van approached down the road, new owners ready to fill the house with new dreams. Troy turned the key to start the engine, glad his mother could turn the next page of her life.

Fresh Start *Paradise House*, it said on the red brick wall by the wrought iron gates. "That's where your grandma is," Mary told Troy, and he nodded. "Have you been to see her yet?" He nodded again. "And your Dad? Has your Dad been to see her?"

"I don't know."

Troy drove the van down the next side road, stopping at the curb by the condos.

"Here we go." Mary felt old as Troy helped her down from the van and walked her to the entrance. "I'll bring in the boxes and the table," he said, "then I'll go unload the rest on Dad and me." She hardly listened.

The condo was already fully furnished. Part of her knew it was Peter's furniture—small modern stuff from his *other* home. He'd said it would be more practical. His house was bigger so he needed the big old furniture. Mary had been too tired to disagree at the time, but now, as she looked around the neat tiny room, she knew for once in his life her husband had been right. The neat little table and chairs fit perfectly into their alcove. The two-seater sofa filled the length of the back wall. The bookshelf would hold her library and videos while the tiny TV, bought second

hand, would work fine by the window with the curtains closed, on its stand bought by Troy through the paper.

Mary had thought it might hurt to know these were Peter's things. But everything was second-hand. She spared the past no thought. Transitory items, they were hers for the present, devoid of memories. It was good.

The bedroom opened from the narrow hall, neat single bed, white dresser, white drawers, clean and bright. If there were stains from Peter's coffee cups, she'd soon cover them. They wouldn't be her stains, not part of her life. Peter wouldn't touch her now.

The furniture and rooms smelled musty. They didn't smell of Peter. It was good.

As Troy brought in boxes, Mary put the kettle on. She spared a moment to feel lonely, wishing Pattie and Dan had moved as well, but perhaps this was better, a completely fresh start, her unencumbered unknown. She wondered what her neighbors would be like, and felt her shoulders straightening to the challenge. Peter? He'd be a friend, she knew. She doubted they'd fall in love again, but at least this way they wouldn't fall out any further.

The kettle whistled its tune and she brewed the tea.